

JAN

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GIBBON



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BY  
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**TO  
MOTHER AND DAD**

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J A N



# JAN

## CHAPTER I

JAN OWEN died in giving birth to her first child.

"But perhaps it's all for the best," Mrs. Henry Owen, Jan's sister-in-law, would sigh when the matter came under discussion, and then she and her companion would purse up their lips and shake their heads with an assumption of wisdom; for as the wife of one of the most influential men in Brynavon, Mrs. Owen was tolerably certain of a sympathetic hearing.

She never troubled to explain even to herself exactly for whom it was best, nor why she thought so.

It hadn't seemed good, much less best, to the girl who, with flaming cheeks and eyes burning like live coals, had fought against Death so gallantly, yielding her ground of Life grudgingly inch by inch, until all her strength was spent.

Nor had it seemed best to John Owen when he knelt by his dead wife's bedside, quite sober, although the kisses he pressed on her cold hands were

hot with the fumes of drink. But since Jan in her lifetime had gloried in his caresses, however rough, it is to be presumed that in death she still understood and was content. Her understanding had been the key to their marriage; her grand, unvarying love the light which had ennobled the sordid passages in their life. Decidedly it was not best that that light should be extinguished.

It did not seem best either for the baby destined to run the race handicapped from the start, unless it could be counted a benefit to be removed from a mother's influence, since as all the town knew John Owen had married beneath him. But modern sociology has settled that a bad mother is better than none, and no one had ever hinted that poor little Jan was bad, only "not quite—quite—well, you know."

Jan's death, if best for any one (which is doubtful), benefitted Mrs. Henry Owen in her smart house on the Parade, since it is easy to understand how difficult it would have been for her to be on terms of intimacy with her sister-in-law Jan, daughter of old Thomas Jones, the farmer at Pentre Fawr.

At the time of Jan's death and the child's birth John Owen was living in the dilapidated old house—"The Plas"—which he had inherited from his father. There was just enough money to live on without being enough either to live well or to

keep the place in decent repair. But a roof, a pipe, rough shooting, riding, whiskey, and Jan, were all that John Owen asked of life.

Henry Owen, his younger brother, was a solicitor in Brynavon—"the family success"—as John said. His house on the Parade was a marvel of provincial achievement with its bay windows, befrilled lace curtain, and every modern contrivance in the use of gas. Mrs. J. H. Rhys, the Vet's wife, had remarked in Mrs. Owen's hearing that she preferred electricity, but Mrs. Owen had very firmly put her in her place by remarking, "With gas, one knows where one is; but with electricity—well, there!"

She had not finished her sentence, but Mrs. Rhys was due to feel crushed, though perhaps the secret of all the gas in the Owens' house lay not in the dangers of electricity, but in the fact that Henry Owen was President of the Gas Light & Coke Company in Brynavon.

All their lives the brothers had been as different as only near-relatives can be.

There was only a year between them, but all through his serious boyhood and middle-aged youth Henry Owen had been his brother's senior in everything but age. He had been in a higher Form at school; he had worked hard and had gained prizes and the respect of everyone with whom he came into contact.

John was born lazy and only retrieved his

reputation from the stain of stupidity by rare and unexpected flashes of brilliance.

"Could do well if he would work," ran one of his reports, but John explained gravely to his father that if the "would" and "could" were transposed, the report would be nearer the truth.

Everybody liked the tall, big-boned boy, partly because his own taste was so catholic. He liked the sons of the big houses round about; he liked the sharp boy from the "Welsh Dragon" Public House, who came into the school on a county scholarship. He liked, too, the farmers' sons, the town-boys, sons of small shopkeepers, and the hulking young miner who had started work in the pit at ten years of age, and had, by sixteen, saved enough to have a year's schooling.

In their attitude to their father, old John Owen, the boys were true to type. Henry was submissive, obedient, and respectful; John was affectionate but often ribald: had more than once defied parental authority, and taken the consequences. And old Owen respected his younger son, and had no wish for his company; but John, the first-born, he loved.

"So you've left school," he growled at the boys one night in July, when John was eighteen and Henry seventeen. They were in the old dining-room, and a log-fire was burning in the hearth as it did every night winter and summer.

"Yes, sir," Henry answered, looking up at his

father respectfully through his spectacles. John did not answer, but stirred the fire with his heel, a habit which always annoyed his brother.

"Well, what next?" asked the old man, glowering from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"I should like to go to Cambridge, sir," Henry suggested. "I spoke to the Head and he advised it."

"Cambridge!" ejaculated John Owen. "What the devil for?"

"I should like to read Law, sir," the boy answered.

"Umph!" grunted the old man. "And what about you, John? Come here, boy, where I can see you, and for God's sake don't stand fidgeting behind my chair."

John gave a little shrug, as if his father's question was too obvious to need a serious answer. "Oh," he said with a lazy smile, "I'll stay here and look after the place with you."

No one could have accused old John Owen of sentiment, but the last words touched him as only the younger John's words could.

"You don't seem to have done much good with your precious schooling," he answered, sharply. "Henry took all the prizes,"

The elder boy laughed. "Yes," he admitted—"good old Henry. But I had a lot of friends," he added as an afterthought.

As a rule, the Squire's jokes were broad, and his

sense of humour primitive, but something in the boy's reply tickled him, and he leant back in his chair and laughed with a hearty bellow till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Henry laughed, too, in a perfunctory way because his father was amused; John saw no joke and watched gravely.

Suddenly the Squire pulled himself together and sat up.

"By God," he said, banging on the table with one hand till the glasses clinked, "you both go to Cambridge or neither of you goes."

"Yes, sir," said Henry.

"As you like, Father," said John.

John Owen, senior, had not much belief in education, because he had not been educated, but if it were a good thing, if Henry were going to have it—well, John should have it, too, whether he liked it or not.

Their life at Cambridge was very much a repetition of what had happened at school.

Henry read hard, had few enemies and fewer friends. Cambridge—the University—his work—were all means to an end, and after his Tripos, in which he took a good second, he went back to Brynavon and was articled to a firm of solicitors in the High Street.

For John, Cambridge was an end in itself. He loved the town with its narrow twisting streets and running water gutters—the one-horse tram,

the bookshops at which he gazed but never bought a book. The sense of the University filled him with awe; he felt that he was living among men of European reputation, and brushing shoulders with those who in future days would mould the destinies of nations.

Incidentally, he never did a stroke of work, and came down at the end of three years without having been placed in the Ordinary examination. But he had a large following of friends, was a member of half a dozen clubs, spoke at the Union, and rowed stroke for his boat the year his college was head of the river. Then he drifted home and fulfilled his first intention of looking after the place with his father.

Henry prospered—as all Henrys should—and by a series of deaths among the partners in the firm—(“So lucky,” his wife would have said if he had then been married to her—“Well, you know what I mean”—)he had risen to be a partner and the firm now stood in the name of Griffiths, Son & Owen. With a sense of the fitness of things, so lamentably lacking in John, Henry began deliberately to look about for a wife. There were plenty of girls in Brynavon who would have been willing to marry an Owen of “The Plas”—red-cheeked, healthy, stout girls, who laughed loudly, and said “Oh, Mr. Owen!” But Henry wanted fresh blood. It wasn’t exactly a question of eugenics with him, because he married before

the time when busy-bodies wanted the State to play nursemaid to its citizens, but his father had always drunk heavily and now John was following suit—and—

To clinch matters, Henry took the pledge and became Secretary of the Local Temperance Association, and married a Miss Annie Morgan, a young lady from Birmingham, who did good works, taught in the Sunday School, and said she had thoughts of becoming a missionary. This was strictly true, because when the minister of the Chapel she attended was ill, an almost indecently good-looking young missionary had “supplied.”

But he married the red-haired girl in the choir, and Henry Owen proposed to Annie, and she accepted him. “You know, dear,” she said to her most intimate friends, which included her whole acquaintance, “he is devoted to me—I feel it is a kind of call.” And her intimate friends told one another that Annie Morgan was a wonderful girl, which she was not—at least not in the way they meant.

Annie had also told her friends that Henry’s people were “County” and had a fine old place in Wales, and had conjured up a pleasant picture of dogs and hunting, and plenty of eggs and butter.

So the shabby old “Plas” with its broken gate and leaf-strewn drive came as rather a shock to her.

Henry tried to prepare her during the walk from their little house in the High Street to the "Plas" for what was in store for her—but his loyalty to his father and John made it hard.

"You mustn't be astonished, Annie," he said, "if Father is sometimes rather—rather—" He wanted to say drunk and didn't like to.

"I understand, dear," Annie answered, brightly, "you mean difficult."

Henry had not meant difficult, and he knew she did not understand, but he let both statements pass unchallenged.

"Was your Father in Chapel this morning?" she asked.

Henry was assailed by a sudden inclination to laugh at the idea of his father listening from a hard wooden seat to the kind of sermon they had heard that morning. But since the joke would have been inexplicable to any one else he refrained.

"No," he said, "he wasn't there."

"Oh?" Annie's tone was a query.

"He never comes and never will," Henry said with conviction, quashing before birth any idea his wife might be going to have as to missionary effort.

"Nor John?" she asked.

"Nor John," he answered.

John was out when they reached the "Plas." He always inspected the pig-sties on Sunday after-

noon, and the fact that his brother and sister-in-law were coming to tea seemed no reason for his altering his habits.

So Henry led his wife into the dark old dining-room.

"Father," he said, proudly, albeit he was rather nervous, "this is Annie—my wife."

Annie went forward, smiling and confident, and, taking the old man's hand, murmured a few well-chosen words about being a daughter to him. At which the Squire was so astonished that he ejaculated: "God bless my soul," and offered her a whiskey and soda on the spot, and when she refused coldly, drank one himself.

Conversation was stilted until John arrived. Under the Squire's eyes Annie did not feel capable of offering to be a sister to John, but she did manage to say that she hoped he would look upon their house in the High Street as a second home.

John thanked her courteously with his slow, charming smile, but Henry suddenly felt hot and cold all over, and drew the visit to an abrupt conclusion.

"Why did you hurry away, Henry?" Annie asked on the way home, clinging to her husband's arm. "I think John is charming."

And John's comment to his father when the married couple had gone, had been—"Good old Henry! but he needn't have gone to Birmingham for that!"

The years did not fulfil Annie's hope of intimacy between the two houses. It was only twenty minutes' walk between them, but they were immeasurably far apart. Time brought the Henry Owens prosperity and they moved to a house on the Parade, which is the fashion-ground of Bryn-avon. And it was here that their son was born—"To Annie (née Morgan) the wife of Henry Owen—the gift of a son." The eldest son of John Owen had been John Owen for generations past, but as Annie said to her husband in privacy—

"Supposing John doesn't marry, and he is so queer. Well, I mean—"

So Henry tackled John on the subject, and John stared at him in an owlish way for a minute or two before he said solemnly: "Call him John—man—call the boy, John."

Old John Owen died soon after his grandson's birth, and John, his son, astonished the countryside, who thought they had been hardened to whatever he might do, by an exhibition of uncontrolled emotion at the graveside.

Henry regarded the whole affair as a regrettable necessity; John felt it as a bitter grief.

"We must try and draw John out of himself now a little," Annie suggested to her husband the night of the funeral.

"Leave him alone," Henry advised, shortly, "the man will be blind drunk for the next couple of days."

Annie thought that her husband's outspokenness was a little coarse. Even if poor John did drink—and unfortunately that was an established fact—still there are some things best not admitted even to one's wife.

Nevertheless, she followed her husband's ruling and left John alone.

It was not till her son was a sturdy little fellow of five that the blow fell.

Mrs. Owen had slipped down town early on a Saturday to speak to Mr. Thomas, the butcher, about the Sunday joint, which for the last two Sundays had not been—well, there—not quite—when she met Mrs. Rhys—the same one who had preferred electricity to gas, and her story drove the Sunday dinner, nay even the Sabbath day itself, completely out of Mrs. Owen's head.

"John married?" poor Mrs. Owen cried. "When—to whom—who says so?"

Mrs. Rhys, of course, could only say what she had heard; in fact, she was really asking Mrs. Owen for information, naturally; but they did say it was to Jan, the girl at Pentre Fawr—old Thomas Jones's daughter.

"And if he must marry a person like that," wept Mrs. Owen to her husband later, "why not do it openly, instead of letting a total stranger tell me in the public street? It's an affront to both of us and I'm ashamed of your brother John."

She was a little distant to her husband for the rest of the day, as though his relationship with his erring brother made him in some way responsible for the marriage.

And when she met Jan in the High Street, she bowed but did not stop to speak, though the chemist's wife and Mrs. Rhys were both watching to see if she would. So Jan held her head high, and John talked of "damned Birmingham airs," and the rift between the house on the Parade and the "Plas" grew wider than before.

And then news spread round the town, in the way news does, that Jan's baby was on its way.

"I never believe gossip," said Mrs. Owen to her husband. "I'm sure I don't know how people can talk as they do. It's not nice."

But John Owen put an end to any doubt when he met his brother one morning, and came crudely to the point.

"Jan's with child," he announced without any preliminary. "God! how I pray it's a boy! Tell your wife."

Without another word he was gone, swinging down to the hill, back home to where Jan sat stitching tiny garments,

"For our son," she said, holding up her face to be kissed, "but, mind you, I shall love him even if he is a girl," she warned.

"It will be a boy," he said. "John, son of John."

"But if not," she pleaded—"you'll love her just as much."

"As much as you?" he cried, mistaking her on purpose. "No, never—not half so much."

"Silly boy," she cooed, running her fingers through his hair. "No, love her as well as if she were John."

A fortnight later Jan's baby was born before all the little clothes were finished, but in his anxiety for the mother John did not care as to the sex of the child.

All the long night Jan tried to live, but when the day dawned over the hills she smiled up at John.

"I'm too tired, sonny," she whispered. And then she died, leaving behind her a baby girl.

## CHAPTER II

JOHN took his trouble like a man—badly. He made no open display of grief as he had done at his father's death, but he brooded in dumb, sullen resentment against a world where things like Jan's death could happen. "Why? Why?" he kept demanding, "and why Jan anyhow?—Jan, who never harmed a soul?" He was tortured by thoughts of her somewhere beyond his reach, all alone in a strange land. God! how she had hated strangers. Home and John had been good enough for her. She had asked so little of life, and even that had been denied her. And, perhaps, she'd be lonely! That hurt John even more than his grief—her loneliness and his. John's friendliness had built up around him a barrier more impenetrable than any reserve could have created. For a reserved man is inaccessible except to a very few, but they have access to the "holy of holies."

Whereas John knew everyone—that is, he remembered their names, and stopped them on the road and asked after their wives, herds, and cattle. So everyone knew "Mr. John, bless him," and that was where the trouble lay. For no one knew

John Owen, no one except Jan, and already the daisies were sprouting on her grave.

John refused to see the baby Jan. "Take the damned brat away," he shouted to the nurse, who brought the child for him to see the day after Jan's funeral.

"Never in all my life, mum, have I been spoken to like that," the nurse confided to Mrs. Owen, preening herself like an angry bird. "It's not the way any gentleman would speak."

Mrs. Owen made a clicking noise with her tongue, which she thought was soothing.

"Mr. John is so—so," she began, but words failing her to describe exactly what John was, she resorted to her favourite—"Well, there!"

They were sitting in the room which had been Jan's bedroom, but which was now being used as the child's nursery. The room below was the dining-room where John sat reading, smoking, drinking, and brooding.

The nurse felt rather better for Mrs. Owen's moral support.

"Never once asked to see the child," she went on, nodding her head. "It isn't natural, is it now, Mrs. Owen, mum?"

Annie Owen looked down at the baby who lay asleep on her arms, and remembered the fuss and excitement in the house when her baby John had been born. Henry had been quite foolish about him, and her baby had had a mother, too.

Whereas this poor little speck of humanity was stranded.

Nothing big ever happens slowly. Big resolves, like waves, rise and break quickly. And before she was aware, Annie Owen knew that she meant to offer to take the child and bring it up with her own boy. She saw as in a review the picture of herself bending over the cradle of the infant—saw herself guiding Jan's tottering footsteps—saw her own struggle to be impartial to her son and the little stranger. It was not her fault, either, that she heard the comments of Bryn-avon on her conduct. “That is something like it,” they would say. “Mrs. Owen, the solicitor’s wife, you know—oh, a very good woman—yes—she took the child. Indeed, she’s like a mother to it, poor thing.”

The nurse gave a deprecating little cough, and Mrs. Owen started.

“No one could have done more than you have, Mrs. Hughes,” she said, handing over the baby to the nurse. “And now I must be going.”

The nurse laid the sleeping child back in the cot. “I’ll let you out, mum,” she said. “These old stairs are dark and that girl Sarah so flighty.”

John Owen heard their voices on the stairs grow louder as they approached, and then suddenly drop to a whisper, and he sat bolt upright, quite still, like an animal scenting danger.

"If she thinks she's coming here," he thought, "she's damn well mistaken."

A few steps took him to the window; he opened it noiselessly at the bottom, and jumped out on the flower-bed beneath. Then having closed the window again, he went round the house, and in by the back door, and crept up the kitchen staircase like a boy trying to escape detection.

At the same minute Mrs. Owen and the nurse were standing in the hall outside the dining-room door.

"Is he in?" whispered Mrs. Owen.

"I haven't heard him go out," the nurse answered.

"Then I'll go in and see him," Mrs. Owen said. "It's my duty," she added, firmly, much in the tone of a martyr going to the stake.

Annie knew exactly what she would say to John. She must, of course, first consult formally with Henry, etc., etc., but for her own part—blood thicker than water, etc.—the call of duty, etc.—and finally the offer to take the baby.

So it was disconcerting to find the dining-room empty, and to have to postpone the speech.

"He will be so sorry to have missed me," she said, turning on the nurse with that fine spirit which never knows when it is beaten.

"And last time, too, mum," murmured the nurse.

John, standing on the landing, could hear the

murmur of their voices and a Puck-like gleam of amusement shot across his tired face.

Then, from the next room—Jan's room—came the sound of a baby's wail.

His first impulse was to charge down the stairs, and fetch the nurse, bring her back "with a flea in her ear" to the care of the child. His next was one of curiosity to see this bit of Jan and himself.

He opened the door softly and tiptoed across the room.

"God!" he murmured, as he looked down through the drapings of the bassinet—"it's Jan."

The baby moved her head and screwed up her face in distress as if already weary of life.

John put out a rough and not over-clean hand to smooth the coverlet, and the baby, waving one arm, touched him, and instantly the little hand closed round his finger.

John shivered with delight. Since Jan died, no one had touched him except the Methodist minister who shook hands after the funeral, and Dio, the Russian poodle, who would nuzzle up against him, and poke his cold nose into his hands.

Then the baby shifted in sleep, opened her hand, and closed it again on his finger, and John's fate was sealed. For the rest of his life he was first and foremost a father. He often bitterly resented his paternal responsibilities, ignored and

refused to accept them, but he never forgot them. The baby's touch wakened in him a sense of fatherhood which never slept again.

The nurse's month was up at the end of the week, and, to her astonishment, John Owen did not ask her to stay.

"But has he made arrangements?" inquired Mrs. Owen, to whom the nurse told her troubles.

"I can't say no further, Mrs. Owen, mum," she protested. "He says to me he says, 'Damned brat,' when I showed him the child, and now I can't be rid of him from the room. Fussing he is, worse than any old woman."

Mrs. Owen digested this in silence. "Please tell Mr. Owen," she said at length, "that I shall come down to see him this afternoon."

"All right," said John, when the message was delivered to him, "and give me the baby while you get off your things."

"Jan," he whispered to the sleeping child—"it's up to us, Jan girl, to you and me. We won't stand any of their damned nonsense, eh, Jan?"

He said much the same, only in more suitable language, to his sister-in-law.

"When, exactly, does Mrs. Hughes go?" she asked, by way of opening fire.

"Friday," John drawled. He was sitting back in his chair, his face well in the shadow, otherwise Annie might have seen the malicious amusement in his eyes.

"But, John," she said, bending forward and speaking earnestly, "have you made arrangements?"

John's proper answer should have been, "No, Annie," and then would have been the time for Annie's well-prepared offer. But since John had no intimation of the stage arrangements, he failed to answer to his cue.

"Yes," he said. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Annie's next move was unpremeditated and very effective—she burst into tears.

"I meant to help you," she sobbed, "and you won't let me."

John watched her for a moment in horrified amazement. "If Henry had seen her cry before he married, he'd never have married her," he reflected. And then a sudden sense of shame overcame him as it did when he had kicked Dio, and he crossed over to the sofa where she was sitting, and sat beside her.

"I'm sorry, Annie," he said, gently patting her arm, as he would have done Dio's head. "Don't take on, old girl, I meant no harm."

Annie dried her eyes. "Oh, John," she quavered, "I was going to say, I'd take the baby, if you like."

It was not the way she had meant to make her offer, but even in its abridged form, it staggered John.

"Good God, no," he cried. Then, quickly,

"But it's good of you, Annie—better than I ever dreamed or deserved."

"I'm quite willing, John," she went on, "and so is Henry. I spoke to him in bed this morning."

John flung back his head and laughed. The idea of Henry and Annie hammering out Jan's future in the best four-poster bed amused him.

There was a slight stiffness in Annie's manner as she straightened herself.

"I laughed," said John, with a well-intentioned lie, "because I'm so much happier. I've been feeling," he went on, slowly, "as if Jan mattered to no one but me. And now you and old Henry care about her. Hurray!"

"But what will you do about her?" Mrs. Owen's voice recalled him to the point.

John stood up and looked Annie full in the face, but it was a minute or two before he spoke.

"I'd like to explain to you, Annie," he said at last, "if I can, because you've been so kind."

"No, no," murmured Annie, bridling, while John reflected that it came easy enough to say things to please once you started.

"Jan," he went on, "is mine now—all mine. That woman"—with an impatient jerk of his head to where the nursery was—"would manage us out of body and soul. I'll often want your advice, Annie, and I'll always want your kindness, but I must have Jan."

"But, John," said Mrs. Owen, "you must have someone to look after the child."

"I've arranged that with Sarah," John announced.

This was so much worse than Mrs. Owen had expected that she said nothing for a minute or two, but fixed upon him two horrified eyes.

Sarah was a red-headed maid-of-all-work, whom Jan had engaged from the Infirmary. The character which the matron gave Sarah was such that none would have been better, for though her manners were very engaging when she pleased, her morals were undoubtedly casual.

"But, John," Annie protested, breathlessly, rather pink at broaching such a subject to a man—"the girl's not even—respectable."

It was the last word of condemnation according to the standard of Brynavon. The mildness and understatement of the verdict damned more effectually than any tirade could have done.

Not respectable! Poor Sarah, lacking that one asset, you lose all.

John puffed away at his pipe, considering the indictment against his plan, and just as Annie thought she had brought him to his senses, he said:

"Yes, I know all about her, but she ought to be able to look after a baby all the better now."

And as the years went by, even Mrs. Owen had to admit that on the surface only, mind you,

John had been right. For Sarah had accepted the charge lightly enough, but like St. Christopher's burden, it grew heavier as time passed, and however lax she might have been with herself she became a martinet on all questions of behaviour where Jan was concerned. The number of things "little ladies didn't ought to do" would have filled a book. Even John didn't know half of them, and Jan thought he knew everything. But it turned out that Sarah knew more, so John was pushed from his pedestal, and the curious thing was that because of his lack of prestige, Jan loved him all the better, though she didn't love Sarah less.

"Look at your shoes, Miss Jan," Sarah would say, pointing with an accusing finger at the mud-stains. "Little ladies didn't ought to walk in puddles."

"Are her feet wet?" John would ask.

Sarah ignored him. "Dirty," she continued, "ugly."

It appeared that little ladies did not eat with open mouths, nor drink loudly (Sarah did both); nor did they dirty their pinnies nor touch the fire. But they answered when spoken to, remembered "Please" and "Thank you," and said their prayers *every night*.

John came under the general scheme of discipline. If he drank too heavily, he couldn't hold the child; unless he changed his wet coat, he gave

her a cold, and his clumping boots would have soiled the nursery floor. Even his language had to be curbed, because Jan came back from him one day, shouting “Damn, damn,” and Sarah slapped her twice hard, and John was so furious that he nearly slapped Sarah. But he stopped swearing; that is, when Jan was about.

In another life, Sarah must have been a philosopher with a tendency to æsthetics. Her standards of right and wrong were expressed in terms of beauty and ugliness, so that Jan came to associate beauty with law and order—ugliness, with all that was not permitted. But she allowed herself the mental reservation that certain “ugly” deeds, such as burrowing in the damp earth with your hands, must be very nice indeed.

Jan’s nursery was a beautiful room (John saw to that), her pram the smartest in Brynavon, saucy Sarah an immaculate nursemaid, and between them Jan should have been spoiled and cosseted.

But she was saved partly by her disposition (her mother’s) and partly by the visits of her cousin John, who by the time Jan was four had reached the noble age of ten. Jan and John were friends; he spoilt her, teased her, made her cry, but he fought Willie Griffiths who called her a baby, and even gave her an old watch of his father’s, with no works, so you can see to what lengths affairs had gone between them.

It was from John that Jan first learnt the word "free." He had been reading books of the cowboys on the prairies and the wild, free life, and he told them to little Jan, who listened with open mouth and eyes.

"Let me free," she said later, pulling from Sarah's hand—"let me free."

One day John appeared at the "Plas."

"May Jan come back to tea, please, Uncle John, and may I take her?"

It was very galling for a fellow to have to walk through the streets with Jan and Sarah. Chaps from school saw one and said things in spite of Willie Griffiths' two black eyes.

"She can go, but Sarah takes her, of course," John answered, and the trouble was there was nothing more to be said.

John often argued at home and sometimes got his own way; he never argued with his uncle.

The road from the "Plas" to the Parade runs straight through Brynavon and there are pavements all the way. But there is a path through the fields and by the stream, and sometimes Sarah could be prevailed upon to go that way.

The stream was one of the joys of Jan's life. The right bank was higher than the left, and John could run and jump across it, and land on the gravel the other side. Of course, he was a boy, and Sarah said little ladies didn't ought even to want to do such things, but—but—! In a word,

to jump that stream had always been the height of Jan's ambition.

This afternoon, when they came to the field before the stream, Sarah met a friend, and Jan tugged at her hand. "Let me free, Sarah," she coaxed.

"Mind you, Miss Jan, don't fall," cried Sarah.

John was already ahead, and Jan followed with the good pace of a four-year-old.

"I'm going to jump the stream," John cried, and he ran, leapt, and landed.

"Lovely, John," cried Jan.

"I'm Broncho Bill," he shouted, dancing about, "free as the air."

"Me, too," chanted Jan, "free as the air."

"You can't be a cowboy," John objected, "you're a girl. You can't even jump the stream."

It was an unkind thrust and Jan's lips drooped.

"Not a girl," she said, and then suddenly with a shout: "Can jump the stream."

She went back and took a little run as she had seen John do, her fat baby legs twinkling across the ground.

At the crucial moment Sarah looked up. "Miss Jan," she screamed—"Miss Jan."

But Jan was tasting freedom and it had gone to her head. She ran on—jumped—missed the landing, and fell into the water.

So she didn't go to tea with Aunt Annie, but caught a cold and spent the next day in bed.

But eggs have to be broken in making an omelet, and when all was said and done, Jan had been for a few minutes "free as the air" and Cousin John thought her "a sport."

## CHAPTER III

HENRY OWEN sat gazing into the fire late one afternoon, his feet on the fender and a deep frown on his forehead.

To any one who knew him, such an attitude at such a time proved that there was something amiss in Henry's well-balanced life.

To begin with, he always had his tea at the Office except on Saturdays—and to-day was Friday. Further, Annie didn't like boots on the fender rail, because they scratched it, and, lastly, Henry's face with the deep frowning line between the brows—square jaw and anxious eyes betrayed the fact that their owner was seriously upset.

The sound of feet moving to and fro and the tinkle of china reminded him that tea was being laid in the drawing-room that afternoon. Henry hated tea in the drawing-room. He hated leaping up and offering visitors bread and butter and cake, balanced on an article his wife called a "curik" and his son John a "curate." He hated the sense of unrest at what was supposed to be a meal, the unreality and discomfort of it. A meal should be a meal, he thought with a wave of irritation, with a table and cloth and knives, plates, and cups prop-

erly laid, not a travesty, a balancing of cups and plates on insecure places. Everything was combining to annoy him to-day.

And yet there was not much cause for him to cavil at his life. The years had brought him prosperity, civic honours, and domestic happiness. The firm, Griffiths, Son & Owen (Henry had been a partner now for many years) was a safe, respected business, the partners known by all the Southern Circuit to be upright, righteous, and scrupulously honest.

But it was dawning on Henry's mind with a bitter certainty that neither he nor his firm would ever set the Thames on fire. He didn't want to, but he wanted to be able to do so. They would pass through life at a pleasant jog-trot, dealing with small affairs and petty issues. And when he died, Annie would wear crape and widow's weeds and talk of "my poor dear husband" and Willie Griffiths would become a partner, instead of being Superintending Clerk, and all would go on as before.

It's not worth your consideration, Henry Owen. Every ambitious young man means great things—very few achieve. And the many who do not achieve what they intended have one day to face the fact that they are not, nor ever will be, the wonders that they thought themselves, but ordinary, every-day men—not much better—not much worse, not much different (there's the sting),

from any other man in any town in any country in the world.

Socrates would have told them that at the psychological moment they realized their limitations they reached the highest level of their lives. But through Henry's mind there kept recurring, with a sickening iteration, last Sunday's text, "So Tibni died and Omri reigned."

Tibni and Omri, too, had thought themselves great men, mighty warriors, law-givers and kings. Posterity put them in their right places—mentioned their life, reign, and death—then let the veil of indifference fall, never to be raised again.

There was, however, an outlet for Henry's ambitions in his civic life. He was an Alderman—the youngest, by the way—a J. P. He hoped in time to represent the county in the House, and toyed with the idea of one day being Mayor, and then, perhaps, who knows?—there might follow a knighthood, accepted only for Annie's sake.

Husband and wife never discussed Henry's future, because though Annie cherished ambition in her heart, she thought it sinful, and did her best, when she remembered, to try and stifle it. But since she was human and couldn't kill it, she did the next best thing—ignored and forgot it.

Henry cheered up slightly at the brighter prospects, then sank back into gloom. If he ever were an M.P., he'd do nothing but vote, waste hard-

earned money in going to London to listen to dry-as-dust debates and to pass out through the right turnstile. Any congenital idiot can be trained to walk through a certain gate, deaf and dumb mutes can vote in a Parliament which offers neither opposition nor criticism—and as for a knighthood, very few decent men could be found to accept what used to be one of the biggest honours of the day.

Leaving himself, Henry's thoughts turned to his wife and dwelt on her with affectionate loyalty. He never allowed himself to criticise her, partly because she was his *wife*, and partly because she was *his* wife. If she had been another man's wife, Annie would have tried Henry sorely—her way of saying “I know,” when the matter was absolutely a closed door to her; her “soft-soap” piety, and the resolute brightness with which she bore the troubles of other people. But possession enhanced things in Henry's eyes, and so what Annie did was right, and even if it wasn't quite right, anyhow it wasn't wrong because Annie did it. It wasn't an ideal marriage; husband and wife called out in each largely an affectionate good nature, the cheapest of all virtues. But in a word, Henry loved his wife, though not well enough to love her faults and all.

Then there was John, his brother. Henry avoided his son like a horse shying at some object in the road, which, however, he must pass in the long run.

How could any man hold up his head with a brother like John Owen about?

Only last Monday, Henry had addressed a large and successful meeting of the local Temperance Association, and had spoken to them in earnest, moving terms. But on the way home the young people could see John Owen staggering down the hill from the "Blue Boar" singing a questionable song with more verve than they had put into their hymns.

On Wednesday old Danny Bellows—the town reprobate—had been up before the Bench for being drunk and disorderly. P. C. Daniels charged him, but while the Mayor was speaking, Henry kept thinking that if P. C. Daniels had done his duty, John would have been standing there beside Danny, instead of having gone off on a day's rabbiting.

Or had the constable done his duty in charging Danny and ignoring John? The question was too subtle, and Henry is not the first nor last to be floored.

And then John, the boy, he had to be faced at last. The frown on Henry's face deepened into a scowl, for the boy was a bitter disappointment, a constant source of anxiety, and, incidentally, the joy of his parents' life. He was tall and slim, with dark hair which crinkled in spite of brushing with water, a complexion like a girl's, and soft, dreamy eyes. He had the prettiest, most caressing

ways with old people, babies, and animals (this category included his parents); he was athletic and truthful. To counterbalance his virtues, he had an uncertain temper, violent, too, when roused. He fought on very little provocation, with "he made me angry," as his reason.

In addition, he was lazy—the learning to be acquired in school was distasteful to him, so he let it slide, doing just barely enough to keep himself out of trouble. He was a wide reader for a boy of twelve and, his father had to admit, a solid thinker.

But, worst of all, he was disobedient. Henry felt he could have put up with everything else.

"Disobedience, John, I will not stand," he impressed on the boy; but the humiliating part of it was he did stand it; he had to.

It had begun so early, too, but then Henry had fought against it from the start.

"John, put your blocks away now," Annie had said when John was little more than a baby.

John was building a road to reach from home to the station and—and— His mother's voice reached him but conveyed no meaning to his little brain. Even in those days she talked to him too much.

"John," she repeated a minute later, "put your blocks away like a good boy."

"No," said John.

Henry looked over his paper at the boy on the floor. It was a shame to disturb him, he was

flushed and earnest. Still, discipline, you know—he must learn to obey.

"John!" he commanded in a voice meant to inspire awe, "put your blocks away."

"No! no!" shouted John, drumming with his little heels on the floor.

Annie laid aside her needlework and got up. There was a look in Henry's eye which frightened her.

"Let me manage him, dear," she said, kneeling down by the child. "I'll do it. Come on, John. John, Mother will help. John's a good boy."

John took not the faintest notice.

"John," called his father, "do as your mother tells you."

"No, no!" screamed John, fighting without knowing why, against he knew not what.

But after John had been carried from the room under his father's arm, kicking and struggling, Annie gathered up the bricks, and then locked herself in her bedroom with her fingers in her ears.

That scene with variations had been repeated all through the years. It seemed as though nothing could teach the boy the duty, the necessity of obedience. John agreed with all the platitudes about obedience.

"You must obey before you can teach," his father said.

John nodded his head. "Yes, Father," he said; then added suddenly, "Why?"

Henry felt annoyed. "Because," he answered, "this world is governed by rules——"

"Father," John interrupted with glowing eyes, "why doesn't someone learn to break the rules and be free."

Free! That was the word most in evidence in John's vocabulary.

Take last Sunday, for instance. "Need I go to Sunday School, please, Mother?" he asked Annie in the middle of dinner.

"Why, yes, John," Annie answered a little shocked, "you must go to Sunday School, dear. It's Sunday, you know."

John turned to his father. He didn't speak, but his look showed that he expected one man to understand and sympathize with the feelings of another.

Henry quite understood. "Certainly you must go, John," he said. "What would happen if everyone were like you?"

"It's a fine day," murmured John, following his own line of thought.

"Perhaps it will be fine to-morrow," soothed his mother. "Another potato, dear?"

John passed up his plate. "There's school to-morrow, too," he said.

"That will do, John," interrupted Henry. "Let once telling do."

John didn't go to Sunday School; he spent the afternoon in the woods, and brought his mother back a glorious bunch of early primroses.

He didn't hide the fact that he had played truant, nor did he mention it. The flowers gave him away. He handed them to Annie half shyly and said, "For you, Mother, dear."

"It's hard to tell you, Father," he said later, facing Henry in the library (there were two bookshelves).

"I forbade it," Henry answered, "and you disobeyed me."

"Yes, Father," John agreed, readily, "but—but—" He fingered with his coat-button, a flush on his face, and a reminiscent gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

Henry would have given much to know what was in the boy's mind.

"But what?" he asked, gently.

"It's Easter Sunday, Father," said John, "and—and—it's fine," he finished, lamely.

It was an attempt to explain the something inside him stirred to life by the day and the sunshine.

Years ago Christ rose from the dead, and that day in the woods nature was rising like a soul on the Resurrection morning.

He meant so much and could express so little.

Henry looked at his son in angry surprise.

"Go," he said at last, pointing to the door—"I can do nothing with you. Go."

John went to his mother, but Henry sat thinking, not of John, but of that day twenty-five

years or so ago when another John had coaxed him into playing truant. They had gone to the wood and there had been primroses then and sunlight—and—

“It’s time to get ready for Chapel, dear,” interrupted his wife, putting her head round the door.

During the service John slipped his hand in his mother’s and gave her a few minutes of such intense bliss that the pleasure was mixed with pain.

He was very punctual for breakfast next morning, and during the week Annie became almost anxious about such preternatural goodness.

“You do seem to have impressed him, dear,” she said to Henry on Wednesday night after John had done his lesson, eaten his supper, and gone to bed.

Henry, remembering the interview, gave a short laugh. “I wonder,” he said. “Anyhow, these things are at the knees of the gods.”

“Of God you mean, dear,” corrected Annie, in blissful ignorance of the ancients and their proverbs.

Henry gulped twice, looked furtively at his wife, whose head was bent over the heel of a stocking she was knitting for John, and said hastily—“Yes, dear, of course, yes.”

Next day John stayed to dinner at school to be ready for football in the afternoon, because his mother did not think it good for him to rush about immediately after a heavy meal.

About half-past three Mrs. Griffiths called.

"Dear Mrs. Owen," she began with a gush, "I won't keep you more than a minute or two, but I felt I must just run in to see you."

Mrs. Griffiths was always "just running in" to people, but considering she turned the scale at fourteen stone and took several minutes to recover her breath after any exercise, her remarks had not to be taken literally.

When with Mrs. Griffiths Annie was pleasantly conscious of her own trim figure and springing walk. "And yet there can't be so much difference in our ages," she used to say, pleasantly, "your Willie is only six months older than John."

Annie rang the bell for tea.

"It's very good of you to come, Mrs. Griffiths," she answered. "I'm sure I haven't seen you for I don't know how long."

Later, when she heard the object of Mrs. Griffiths' call, she hoped double the time might elapse before their next meeting, for her first words shattered Annie's hopes of her son's budding reformation.

"I never like to complain of other people's children, Mrs. Owen," began Mrs. Griffiths, "but really—well, I don't know what to say."

Annie stiffened with annoyance. John, dear boy, was sometimes trying, very trying, but she could not forgive any outsider for noticing it.

"What's the matter now?" she enquired with an

effort at brightness; “nothing very dreadful, I hope.”

At that moment the maid brought in the tea on a tray, and the conversation was switched on to subjects like the weather, Mr. Griffiths’ rheumatism, and the view across the river from Mrs. Owen’s best bedroom.

When the maid closed the door behind her, Mrs. Griffiths told her tale. John and Willie had been fighting again. Far be it from her to shield her own child—but really if Mrs. Owen would forgive her saying so, John was just a little—perhaps just a little quarrelsome. And the fight had taken place in the High Street, and it wasn’t nice, was it? And if Mrs. Owen could only see poor Willie’s face—well—they’d had to send for Doctor Harris.

“You mustn’t worry, Mrs. Owen,” said her friend. “John’s an only child and it’s so hard not to spoil them.”

“So naughty of him to fight,” said John’s mother, “and six months younger than Willie.”

“Ah!” Mrs. Griffiths sighed, “poor little Willie’s always been so delicate. I sometimes fear——”

Mrs. Owen had heard the story of Mrs. Griffiths’ fears before, and at present was more occupied by her own.

“If you must go, dear,” she interpolated, skilfully misinterpreting a movement of Mrs. Griffiths, “I’ll speak to John.”

“He said I lied,” said John later to his father,

and by dint of question it transpired that the fight had been about Jan.

John had seen her from the school gate, with Sarah, while he was waiting for the dinner-bell. And while he talked to her (Willie Griffiths standing near by), a man passed driving some cows down to the cattle market. Since Jan was afraid of cows, John and Sarah stood in front of her.

"Fancy being afraid of cows," remarked Willie the bold.

"She doesn't like them, but she's not afraid," lied John.

"Story-teller!" chanted Willie, "story-teller, she is."

Whereupon John fought him, not with a sane sporting spirit, but with a mad desire to hurt the white-faced creature who dared to speak to Jan and him.

Henry and Annie listened to the tale.

"But, John, dear!" said Annie, with a worried little frown on her brow, "Jan is afraid of cows, though you didn't know it."

"Yes, I did, Mother," John answered, quickly.

Henry kept his temper with difficulty.

"Then you lied?" he questioned, accusingly, because he was so proud of John's uncompromising truthfulness.

"Yes." John faltered for the first time.

"Then why fight about it?" Henry asked, quickly.

"Willie mustn't say so—even if I did," John defended himself, "besides, Father, it wouldn't have been a lie really, not in the end. I meant to teach her not to be afraid."

John spoke jerkily and something glistened on his dark lashes. He could stand punishment, but this baring of his soul was intolerable. If only they'd understand and let him go, he'd be able to save the remnants of his self-respect. But, by an error of judgment, Henry thought this a good time to speak seriously to his son, touching like a heavy hand on a wound, his lapse from truth—and his chivalry for Jan—until John's quivering nerves found relief in hysterical tears.

In a moment Annie's arms were round him, and with the tears streaming down her own cheeks, she kissed and fondled him as she had done when he was nothing but a baby-boy.

But for all that, John went to bed with something like hatred in his heart for his parents. They'd stormed the bulwarks of his privacy, held up to the blazing light of common-sense his thoughts and motives and called it understanding him.

Downstairs, Henry and Annie sat on the sofa discussing him.

"I don't know what to do with him," sobbed Annie.

"He's very fond of you," Henry replied, touching his wife's hand.

"And you, dear," she comforted in return. "Henry," she said, suddenly, "let's talk to John, your brother, I mean."

"Yes—we might do that," Henry agreed. John had a knack of coming straight to the point, cutting any knot, and solving a difficulty by a frontal attack. Besides, John, his son, took after his uncle; that, in a word, was the trouble.

John, as son of John, would have been no oddity, but the natural thing. John, as son of Henry, was the worry. And it was as Sarah sometimes said, "no joke of a worry" which occupied Henry's thoughts this Friday afternoon as he sat waiting for his brother.

"He's come, dear," said Annie. "I asked him into the next room."

Henry followed his wife into the drawing-room, ruined by too much furniture, and a wealth of photographs and china ornaments. There was not one comfortable chair, not one secure, serviceable table there. The gas-fire leaked and the atmosphere was both cold and stuffy—but since it was the guest chamber, three sane people left the warmth and comfort of their living rooms and gathered there.

"Hallo, Henry, old man!" John greeted him, "family council, eh, what!"

"Shall we have tea first?" suggested Annie. "Sugar, John? Henry, pass John the bread and butter."

"It's about John," said Henry.

"We're worried about him," added Annie.  
"Tea, dear," this to Henry.

John looked from one to the other as they told their tale. It was preposterous, but he was always sorry for Henry, and the more prosperous Henry grew, the more he pitied him. "Chasing the shadows on the moon," was the way he described Henry's life.

"You can understand, can't you," said Annie at the close, "that we're troubled?"

"Yes, I'm sure you are," John answered, turning to his sister-in-law with the same gentle courtesy that the other John always showed her. "But I don't think you need be."

"How—why—what do you mean?" Henry asked, quickly.

John put down his cup on a rickety little table and leant back in his chair, which threatened to give way beneath the strain, so he stood up and leant against the mantelpiece.

"John is true to type," he said, "he's an Owen."

"But, John," urged Annie, "he always thinks he can do as he likes—that he's different from other people."

"We all do," John Owen answered. "Jan's the same."

"Oh, Jan!" Henry could not keep the impatient irritation out of his voice. Everyone knew John

was ridiculous about the child but—hateful thought—so was the other John.

"Let's leave Jan then and look at you, my friend," John said, turning to his brother.

"Me?" stammered Henry, his colour rising.  
"Thank God I'm different."

John Owen roared with appreciative laughter.  
"There you are," he said, "different, of course. You're an Owen like the rest of us, fighting for freedom."

Annie made a dissentient movement, but John swept her aside.

"The Owens of the 'Plas' have been for generations countrymen, old Henry's a townsman, a lawyer. We've always gone to their mouldy old Church—(God knows I don't)—but you," pointing to Henry, "what are you? Methodist—Baptist—or something fancy!"

"Congregational," supplied Annie with dignity.  
"Didn't I say so?" went on John. "Did you ever hear of an Owen being a teetotaler before? And you with blue ribbons and Temperance Bands. You're just the same as the rest of us, old man. We all want to be ourselves—and John's the same. You want John to be your son—John wants to be himself."

"But, John! surely we must try to guide him?" Annie asked.

"I suppose you must try," John admitted, "but it will hurt you and won't move the lad."

"Nonsense, John, you don't know what you're talking about." Henry stood up with such energy that the gold wood chair fell over backward and in his emotion he did not notice nor care.

"No—perhaps not. But you asked me my opinion and you've had it. Good-bye, Annie—cheer up."

Annie made one more desperate attempt. Somehow she had great faith in John—he seemed to be so sure.

"John," she said, blocking his way to the door, "what would you do—if John were your son?"

"I hope I'd recognize my limitations," John answered, "and pack the lad off to boarding-school."

Annie stood aside and let him pass. "Thank you, John," she said with dignity, "but I think a mother's instinct knows better how to deal with a difficult boy like John than strangers."

"I agree with you, Annie," chimed in her husband. "It's a critical time, and to send John away now is a confession of defeat."

But the curious part of the whole affair was that John went to boarding-school next term.

## CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a pouring day about a week after John's departure and Jan was feeling at a loose end.

She was now six years old—a tall, slim child with black glossy hair cut in a straight fringe across her forehead. She had very little colour in her cheeks, and her paleness was accentuated by the fact that she always wore white frocks.

"A woman shouldn't wear colours," was one of her father's beliefs.

"A clean frock every day, and not even a pinafore; such a lot of washing," said Mrs. Henry Owen in confidence to Mrs. Griffiths.

Jan stood by the window, breathing on the pane, and then drawing patterns with her fingers.

"Daddy," she said, suddenly, "where's John?"

"John's gone to school, old darling," her father answered. "Come away from the window, by the fire."

"What's school, Daddy?" enquired the child.

John laid down his paper and lifted Jan on to his knee.

"It's a place where they teach you things—reading and writing, sums and French and—"

He hesitated in his effort to remember exactly what they had tried to teach him at school.

"What for, Daddy?" demanded Jan, playing with the guinea-piece which hung on her father's watch-chain.

It was a difficult question. Why did people learn a mass of facts at school which were totally irrelevant to the issues of life? What was the use of amassing a store of information, only to forget it again as soon as school days were over?

It disciplined the mind, of course, but discipline was Greek to Jan.

"I think, darling," he said, "that at school they teach you how to read and count your pennies, so that you can do things for yourself and be free of other people."

"Free," echoed Jan, picking out her favourite word. Then, "Jan wants to write to John, Daddy."

"Righto!" said John, "I'll help you."

He had guided her hand as far as "Dear John," when she dropped the pencil.

"Do they learn you to write at school?" she asked.

"Yes," John answered. "Come along. I've got to go out soon."

"Can I go to school, Daddy?" she said.

"Some day," said her father.

"When?" cried Jan, thoroughly interested.

"When you're bigger," he replied.

"How big, Daddy?" coaxed the child.

"Look here, Jan," John promised, "if you want to go to school, I'll think about it. Let's finish the letter now."

But Jan climbed down from her father's knee. "Sarah's baking buns," she said, "Jan will write to John when they learn me how."

John puzzled his brain for days to come over education, and Jan's education in particular. Sitting smoking over the fire, after the child had gone to bed, and with Dio snoring at his feet, he hacked out of his mind some sort of scheme.

Education, he decided, must make men and women free to live—unhampered by sin, folly, and prejudice. That was to be the foundation stone of Jan's life. But how to begin, that was the question. She must be taught, of course, but where, how, and by whom? It was the first time that John had ever felt the slightest doubt about his capacity as an educator, and this uneasiness was increased when next day he bought an armful of books on education and found that someone had said, "Give me a child for the first seven years of its life, and I care not who has it afterward."

If that were really true, thought John savagely, why the devil hadn't somebody told him so—and Jan was six already. Curse Henry for a fool! and Annie! They ought to have warned him. He threw the book aside and went on to another of his purchases, Rousseau's "Emile," and followed that

by Fénelon's "Education des jeunes Filles." He then dipped into Machiavelli's "Prince," though he would have been put to it to explain how that could affect Jan. William James's "Talks to Teachers" was his next effort, and then in despair he read the article on "Education" in the Encyclopedia Britannica.

He stored all the books, except the Encyclopedia, in a corner, and never touched them again, but the next morning he took Jan out with him and climbed the hill to the village school.

It was the play hour, and the yard was full of shouting, scurrying children who stopped and stared as John and Jan passed through the yard into the building.

Mr. Samuels had been at school a year with John.

"Hallo, Sammie!" John greeted him. "How goes it?"

Samuels hurried forward, a thin, nervous young man, with a deprecating manner, who moved his hands about just as Sarah and Jan did when they played "This is the way we wash our hands, on a cold and frosty morning."

"Good morning, Mr. John," said Samuels, "how's Miss Jan to-day?"

"Quite well, thank you," Jan answered. "Daddy, is this school?"

"Yes," said her father. "Samuels, I've brought you a new scholar."

"Oh, no, Mr. John, surely not." Samuels knew his place—there was nothing of the socialist about him. "I shouldn't, no, really, Mr. John."

"Look here, Sammie," began John, "Jan darling," he said in parenthesis, "go out and play with the little girls"—"I want Jan to be taught ordinary things. I want her to be free from snobbery and class prejudice."

"But, Mr. John," protested the little schoolmaster, "Miss Jan is different from my children. She'll learn things here——"

"It won't harm her," said John with decision; "she'll find her level, and cut her own way. Starting here, she'll avoid in later life Toryism—you'll teach her that by the atmosphere. But your children unconsciously will settle in her mind once and for all the question of Socialism, too—see—eh?"

Mr. Samuels didn't see; but he couldn't refuse John.

So Jan stayed on that morning in Standard I, and came home, her arm linked with that of Bessie Richards, whose red hair troubled the medical inspector, and they came down the hill together, singing:

Mr. Samuels is a very good man,  
He tries to teach us all he can—  
Reading, writing, and arithmetic,  
But he never forgets to use the stick.

John watched her from the gate with a sinking heart.

"Good God!" he said. "It's up to me now if she learns as quickly as that."

All through dinner Jan babbled about her wonderful experience of the morning. "We did copies, Daddy," she said, "on slates with a pencil what squeaked."

"You didn't oughter speak with your mouth full, Miss Jan," admonished Sarah, who was handing John vegetables.

"Good for you," said John.

"Teacher said you hold it like this." Jan demonstrated on her fork and knocked over her glass of water.

Sarah was sulky, because after all her teaching Jan was to be thrown in company with "them village children," and it wasn't until John lied and said he had a throat and would Sarah please put on a compress for him that night, that she came round again.

He hoped she'd forget, because he loathed compresses, and Sarah had a way of bringing his shaving water extra early to see if he had worn it all night.

Jan went back to school in the afternoon, marshalled there by Sarah, in spite of all her protests.

John announced that he would not be in for tea, went for a long walk with Dio at his heels,

and entering the Town at the other end, knocked at the door of the Rev. Gironwy Evans. John had met the man twice before, once at his wedding, for Jan had been a staunch Methodist and had been married at Capel Seion, and once again at Jan's funeral.

Neither before nor since had John troubled the Methodist denomination nor any other for many a long year, and as he stood waiting in the Evans's drawing-room, he was conscious of a distinct feeling of nervousness.

Mr. Evans was engaged for a few minutes, and twice John decided to leave the house, and twice changed his mind, because he'd come to talk about Jan.

John moved to and fro restlessly about the little room. The only object of interest was the silver crown which had been presented to Mr. Evans some years ago at the National Eisteddfod. For the dowdy little minister who preached to the small congregation at Capel Seion was a poet and genius. His dining-room was furnished with the bardic chairs won in the local Eisteddfods; his poems were gems of lyric beauty.

In almost any part of Wales there can be found men of high distinction and great ability spending their lives in an uneventful obscurity. They write in their mother tongue, which any translation mars, and so their fame never travels beyond the borders of the little principality whose main in-

dustry is the breeding of poets, with politicians as a side issue.

John was still examining the crown when Mr. Evans came in.

"I'm sorry to keep you, Mr. Owen," he said.

"Not a bit," John answered, curtly, because he felt nervous. "Not a bit. The fact is," he went on, coming straight to his point, "I want to speak to you about Jan, my little girl."

"The study is warmer," said the minister, showing John into a little room stacked with books. "What is it I can do for you?"

Neither of the men sat down, but stood one on each side of the fireplace, their elbows resting on the mantelpiece.

Mr. Evans came of what newspapers call "humble parentage." To be exact, his father had been a labourer earning 10/- a week, and his mother, before the day of the steam laundry, had done a little washing for the gentry.

John Owen belonged to the "County," with a University education to his balance, but he could not emulate the other's air of quiet composure, and if an entire absence of self-consciousness is the test of a gentleman, it was the minister who attained the standard.

"You knew my wife," said John at last.

"Yes," agreed the other, "I baptized her as a baby, and received her into my church. I married and buried her."

"Well, it's about her baby—her little girl—she's Jan, too!"

John waited for Mr. Evans to make some remark, but he was staring at the fire.

"I want her taught," said John. "She ought to know something about religion. I don't go in for that kind of thing myself."

Surely it was up to a professed Minister of Religion to challenge such a statement, and to make some indication that he heard, and not to stand like a statue in the game Jan called "Dumb Crambo."

But Mr. Evans did not answer and John blundered on.

"She's six and I want her taught religion."

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Evans.

"Praise the Lord," thought John. "He's going to speak at last."

The minister raised his head and looked John full in the face. "Very interesting, Mr. Owen," he said, pleasantly, "and where do I come in? Why am I honoured by your confidence?"

"Curse the fool!" thought John, but out loud he said: "I wanted you to teach her."

"Not I!" jerked out Mr. Evans, with decision, "not I. You don't believe in religion, you say, and you throw the onus of the child's education on to me. Bear your own burdens, man; teach her yourself or leave her untaught."

John Owen had never been spoken to like that

before! It was preposterous, the fellow was an outsider. Yet, somehow, John found himself standing in the street, conscious of having shaken hands with him, and in reply to Mr. Evans's invitation to call again, of having said, "Thank you."

As he walked home, John tried to analyze the motives that had sent him to a Methodist minister instead of to the vicar, Mr. Andrews.

Of course it was absurd to connect the old vicar with religion. He'd talk about politics—rabid old Tory; he'd advise you on dogs and horses; he read the lessons in Church, naturally, in a dialect of his own, "Whun the wicked mun." He was a most assiduous visitor, and the Bishop was graciously pleased at the large number of boys and girls he was invited to confirm till it appeared that Mr. Andrews had taken practically the whole of Standard Seven, and prepared it for confirmation. So that the Sunday following the confirmation service, the church was as empty as usual, and all the boys and girls went to their respective chapels. A good fellow, a first-rate man, but not one of whom to ask advice.

Besides, it would have been disloyal to Jan to entrust any part of her child's education to a church in which she did not believe. No, help had to be asked of Jan's church and it had been refused.

"Curse him," muttered John as he turned in at the "Plas" gate. There was a stir among the bushes at the side and John stood still.

"Who's there?" he called.

A small figure slipped out from the shadows on to the path.

"John!" exclaimed John Owen, "what in the name of thunder——"

"I've run away," said the boy. "I hate school."

It was dusk, but something in the boy's face made John say quickly: "Come along in, old man."

The boy accepted his uncle's outstretched hand and followed him to the house.

Jan was having a bath before the kitchen fire, so John took his nephew straight upstairs, stripped him of his dripping clothes, rubbed him down, and put him to bed in a pair of pyjamas twice too big for him.

"One minute, old man," he said, "I'll get you some food."

Then, while John the younger ate, he volunteered information, and it was curious that John the elder accepted what was told him, but asked no questions.

"It was hateful there, Uncle John," he said, drinking hot soup. "No—they don't know at home. I met Tommie Edwards taking up the telegram and made him give it to me."

John put his hand into a pocket of the wet coat, and pulled out a crumpled telegram—

Is John with you?—Left here yesterday—

RICHARD JONES, Head Master.

“I’ll answer it,” said John, pulling out a pencil; “I’ll say, ‘John here’. What else?”

“I’ll not go back,” said John.

“No?” inquired his uncle. “Listen here, old man. If you don’t, you’ll feel an awful fool. All the fellows will laugh at you for a bit of a sop. And it will be pretty rotten for your father and mother.”

“I’ll not go back,” repeated John, though his lips had quivered at the mention of his mother.

“If you go,” went on the other John, speaking as to an equal, “you’ll probably get the hell of a time at first, but you’ve grit, boy, and you’ll win through and come out top.”

“They never leave a man alone,” said John. “I’m never free.”

“It’s rotten, I know,” agreed John Owen, laying his hand on the counterpane, “but you get free in the end. I swear you do, old man.”

“Honest?” asked the boy.

“Touch hands on it,” said his uncle, falling back to the oath of his boyhood.

“Say, I’ll go then,” said John at last.

“I’ll come, too,” said the elder John. “Now go to sleep, old man, and we’ll start early.”

"Can't I see Jan?" the boy asked.

"No," said John, "Jan wouldn't understand. No one else shall know; it will be our secret—yours and mine."

So Sarah sent off a telegram,

Will bring boy back to-morrow—OWEN.

And while she ran to the post-office, John took Jan, and nursed her before the fire, and while the child babbled on about school—the wonders of Bessie Richards and the omnipotence of Teacher—John's thoughts were wandering to John, poor lad, his hand against the world, and to Henry and Annie. Poor boy, but anyhow, he'd a mother. Henry hadn't all the responsibility.

"Jan fach," he murmured.

"What you say, Daddy?" asked Jan.

"Nothing—old darling," said John, hugging her to him. "I didn't speak to you."

"Who you speak to Daddy?" asked Jan, looking round the room.

"I was thinking of another little Jan," he explained, "your mother."

"Bessie Richards has a muvver," said Jan, then, suddenly, "Where's my muvver, Daddy?"

"She's in Heaven," said John.

The reply sounded strange to his own ears, but he couldn't bring himself to call Jan dead.

"Where's Heaven, Daddy?" went on Jan, pulling the lapels of his coat.

John's imagination outran his theology.

"It's far away," he said, "all flowers and birds and sunshine. And it never rains there."

This sounded too tempting. "Jan wants to go to Heaven," gurgled the child.

"No, no!" cried John, clasping the baby to him almost roughly. "Jan mustn't go away. She mustn't leave Daddy."

It was a good deal past her usual bedtime, and Jan was very tired. In addition to that, her father had startled her, and she wanted to get away from the rain to see some person called "Muvver," so she broke out into a loud wail and all John's efforts to comfort her were fruitless. So that when the door opened and Annie and Henry came in followed by Sarah, John was holding a flushed, screaming child on his knee, who wailed out at intervals, "I want to go to Heaven, too—I do want to go."

Sarah carried Jan off to bed and quieted her immediately by saying: "You'll go one day, Miss Jan. If you was to leave us now, who'd put milk in the master's tea?"

"Jan put milk in Daddy's tea," echoed the child.

"If you're a good girl," said Sarah. "Little ladies didn't ought to scream like that."

John, who had been listening outside the door, tiptoed away. Outside his own bedroom he stopped to listen, then gently pushed open the door and went in. The boy was lying asleep, one grimy

hand against his face, his lips curved into a little smile.

"Good lad," said John and went back to his visitors.

Annie had taken off her coat and was sitting on one side of the fire, resplendent in a pink crepe-de-chine blouse and taffeta skirt. Henry was on the sofa, gazing moodily into the fire.

"She's come to give me advice," John realized, "and dragged old Henry along."

"We haven't seen you for so long," said Annie. "Henry thought we'd pop in."

Henry supported his wife to the extent of an inarticulate noise in his throat.

"You haven't been down for ages, Annie," said John; "too gay, eh?"

"No—not exactly," replied Annie with a little smirk; "but you know I'm always busy."

"Then it's jolly good of you to turn out on this dam' dark night. Damp, Annie," he said, catching sight of her disapproving face.

"I really came," began Annie. "Henry thought and so did I——" she broke off, incoherently.

"John," she blurted out, "is it true that you've sent Jan to the village school?"

"Yes," said John, "she began to-day."

"But, John," gasped his sister-in-law, "how can you? Mrs. Griffiths told me—her maid's mother lives up the hill—but I wouldn't believe it—never."

John knew with whom he had to deal. "It's like this, Annie," he said, "you told me Jan needed companionship—you said I'd spoil her—you suggested school——"

She could never withstand John's subtle flattery, and she unbent, while Henry felt a strong desire to kick John for playing up to Annie.

"I didn't mean that kind of school," she said in the same tone as she explained knotty points to her Sunday-school class. "I meant a proper school—like the one we chose for John."

"John says he hates it," broke in Henry. "That boy's going to give us trouble."

"No, no, Henry," Annie assured him. "He's really a good boy, and he'll settle down. I've written to him to-day. That will be all right."

Annie fell asleep that night happy in the conviction that she was the guiding light, under Providence, in the lives of at least three men; Henry that he'd been a fool to go, that Annie let John foozle her, and that John was a bounder. While John, with his arm round his brother's boy, understood better than ever before "that marriage, should not be entered upon lightly." Then he thought of Jan—of both Jans, in fact.

"It's been worth it," he sighed as he fell asleep.

## CHAPTER V

**W**HEN Jan was ten years old Sarah gave a month's notice.

She had often done so before, and for a variety of reasons ranging from John's refusal to stay in bed when he had a temperature of 102 to the cat's depositing new-born kittens in her best Sunday hat.

John was finishing his breakfast when the bomb descended.

"Why, Sarah," he asked, "what's the matter?"

Sarah grew very red and tugged at the two corners of her apron.

"If you please, sir," she stammered, "I'm going to get married."

"By Jove, Sarah, that's news," John said, "and what am I going to do, and Jan, I'd like to know?"

Sarah immediately wept long and loudly. "That's just what he said when I tell him about you," she wailed.

"Of course he did," John soothed, shifting in his chair uncomfortably. "He's a lucky fellow, Sarah, and I hope he knows it."

"He drinks," Sarah volunteered.

John stood up and walked to the fireplace, not

because there was a fire there, but because he wanted to turn his back on Sarah. He felt rather sheepish considering his own reputation, but at the same time it struck him as funny.

Yes, but not funny for Sarah—she'd have to live with him. After all, surely a man could be broad-minded enough to see that the thing he did and enjoyed doing was evil in another.

"That's bad, you know, Sarah," he said, facing her.

"Yes, sir," she admitted.

"Perhaps if you help him, he'll get over it?" he suggested.

Sarah shook her head.

"Perhaps," she said, doubtfully, in a tone that implied that in her mind there was no shadow of chance that he would.

"Will he make you a good husband, Sarah?" John asked.

Sarah considered the question. "Maybe," she answered, guardedly, "but anyways he'll make me respectable."

John thought over her answer as he walked over to a small farm he owned some miles away.

In her own way, Sarah had ruled the domestic arrangements of the "Plas"; she had had charge of Jan, and John had backed her authority when Jan rebelled, and John had thought her happy (if he ever thought about her). Yet all the time she had been conscious of being an outcast, her

sense of propriety had been outraged by her own deed, and now she had the opportunity to reinstate herself, so that she could hold up her flaming head of hair with the rest, not toss it in scornful defiance at the world, as before.

In this world things have to be paid for and there is no "on credit system," and the price of Sarah's honour was a drunken husband who might be good to her—but then might not.

It was a risk, of course, but the stakes were high and Sarah chose to venture.

"You didn't tell me who your man is, Sarah," John said to her after Jan had gone back to afternoon school.

"Davy Jones, eldest son of Pentre Fawr," Sarah blurted out.

John swore under his breath. The man, besides being his brother-in-law, his wife's eldest brother, was a stupid lout, obstinate and dull. He was a bad farmer and an impossible tenant! Nothing he touched prospered, and he was always behindhand with his rent, and in debt all round. John knew about him, because he was his landlord.

"I wish you'd found a better fellow, Sarah," he said.

"Yes, sir," Sarah admitted, "so do I, sir."

"But perhaps you'll change him."

"Yes, sir—I hope so, sir," and there John left him.

Sarah broke the news to Jan after tea, when Jan

was sitting before the kitchen fire drying her hair, and reading "What Katy Did at School."

Sarah came to the hob to get a fresh iron—spat on it—and said:

"I'm going to get married, Miss Jan."

"So am I," said Jan, "and live happy ever afterward and have thirteen babies, all girls."

"That's silly, Miss Jan," said Sarah—"girls, indeed—boys, I say."

"Oh, I hate boys," said Jan, "all except John, and he's nearly a man now."

"I'll be leaving this day month to go to Pentre Fawr," sniffed Sarah.

There was a dramatic pause. Jan was as astonished as even Sarah could wish. Then she turned on her with glowing eyes. "Oh, Sarah!" she cried, "shall I be able to pour out tea when you go?"

It wasn't much of a reward for ten years' devotion to another woman's child, but Sarah was a philosopher, though an unconscious one.

"You'll have to ask Master," she said, drily, "and if you hold your hair so close, it'll catch fire."

"We'll see," John answered when Jan asked him about the tea. "I've another idea: how would you like to go away to school?"

"I shouldn't," said Jan, decidedly.

"Good," said her father; "that settles it!"

"What sort of school, Daddy?" Jan asked—her

feet apart, her head on one side. She wore her hair short as a safeguard against the proximity of Bessie Richards and her kind.

"A nice big school," John answered, "and you sleep there in little beds all in a row."

"I wouldn't like to sleep with the little girls in school," said Jan with a little sniff, reminiscent of some of her school companions.

"These would be as clean as you are," John reminded her.

"Where'd you be, Daddy?" was her next question.

"I'd wait here till you came home."

"Alone?" Jan shot out the word with frightened emphasis.

It was one of the fears of her life that her father would be lonely when she was not with him.

"Dio will be with me," he made haste to comfort her.

Jan's tense little face relaxed.

"Dear Dio," she said, patting the old dog's head. "When do we go, Daddy?"

"Surely she can't want to go," thought John. "Poor baby, she's frightened."

"Not till you want to go, darling," he said aloud, kissing her. "Anyway, not till after Sarah's gone."

"Oh, I do hope she'll be quick getting married," cried Jan.

John's lower jaw dropped in amazement.

"Jan," he said, "you've the makings of a fine woman, my girl. Eh, Jan?"

He laughed and tossed her up to the ceiling because she looked so solemn.

The next month was a busy time for the household at the "Plas." John wrote innumerable letters to secretaries and head mistresses of schools, and swore at their answers and tossed their prospectuses in the waste-paper basket. It was so difficult to say exactly what he wanted: he knew that he didn't want a coddling home school, nor a co-educational effort, nor a cramming establishment, nor some freakish enterprise where the children taught one another and had bare arms and legs. He decided at last on a company boarding school in Kent, run on high school lines. The pupils were encouraged, but not forced, to take competitive examinations for the sake of keeping up the standard of work, and because many girls passed on to the universities. There was for any elder girl who wished it a year's training in domestic economy. The prospectus also mentioned hockey and tennis, gymnastics on Ling Swedish System, and a swimming bath. The fees were 90 guineas a year, "and they won't make much on Jan's food," John reflected.

The name of the Head Mistress, Miss Blakeborough, decided him. She signed herself "N. Blakeborough, Classical Tripos M.A. (Dublin)," and by raking in the recesses of his memory, John

remembered very dimly a girl, Nesta Blakeborough, who had been at Girton in his Cambridge days.

She'd been fair and fluffy then, and he'd rather liked her and meant to write to her—only, only—the time passed and he'd forgotten.

So he wrote that very evening:

DEAR MISS BLAKEBOROUGH:

I can't expect—nor even hope—that you will remember me. We met at Cambridge.

(He stopped writing and tried to think where he had met her, but couldn't—so he put a full stop after Cambridge.)

I must congratulate you on the success you have achieved, and I am writing to ask you whether there will be a vacancy at your school next term for my little daughter Jan, aged 10.

With kindest regards,

I am,

Yours sincerely,

JOHN OWEN.

Miss Blakeborough, strange to say, could remember where she had met John. She remembered, too, with a smile, what he'd said, and with a blush what she'd answered.

She had neglected her studies at Girton for several days, mooning round Woodlands (the curving garden path) and meeting the post. But no letter had come, so she worked with tremendous

zeal till the end of the term when she went up to Scotland to her people, and John "went down" from Cambridge for good, and forgot all about her from that day to this.

Left to herself, Miss Blakeborough would have written a charming personal note, but the constant demands made upon teachers do not create an atmosphere of romance. Miss Blakeborough was interrupted by a girl who came to report the loss of a brooch, the Matron followed with the news that Jessie Whittaker had a sore throat, temperature and rash, and a mother who was visiting the school that afternoon just slipped in for a chat about little Janet's last term's report which had not been quite satisfactory.

So when Miss Blakeborough did write she sent a short, businesslike note, telling Mr. Owen that she remembered him perfectly, and would be pleased to take Jan, and there was a vacancy five weeks hence at the half-term.

It was then the beginning of May, but John refused the offer and settled for Jan to go in September.

Jan was busy because she was happy. There was school morning and afternoon, and playing round the stream and on the road. There were flowers in the garden, and the weather was fine and growing warmer.

"Heavenly!" Jan called it, and it was not an adjective of extravagant praise, but descriptive

because she had never forgotten her father's description of Heaven.

Sarah grew quieter and very pale as the days passed. She was up with the lark now, scrubbing the "Plas" upstairs and down till you could have eaten your dinner from the floor, so to speak. The afternoons were spent in sewing. There were wonderful garments of coarse calico—all handmade and adorned with feather-stitching. There were others of flannelette thick and woolly, and two petticoats of real Welsh flannel which, forty years later, one of Sarah's nieces, who got on in the world, cut into a golf skirt.

Only God knows the hopes and fears that were stitched into those garments; the awful gnawing, restless hope of respectable marriage with babies she could be proud to own; and the tremulous, sickening fear that something should arise and stop the wedding.

And, anyway, what about that boy of hers—the first-born child of her shame? He'd been put out to board, and she'd seen him once or twice.

Davy Jones had a girl of twelve, Elvira, by his first wife. Would he take in her Harold along of her? The question tortured Sarah day and night. It was hardly more than curiosity that had driven her to see the boy, so long as she stayed where she was, but she could not bear to leave him when her fortunes were on the mend.

When everything about Jan had been decided,

John asked Annie's advice so skilfully that she suggested the very school John had hit upon and offered to write to Miss Blakeborough, on the score that "a woman understands so much better, you know."

"I think it is a good plan, Annie," said John, "and when the time comes, perhaps you'll help me with Jan's clothes, will you?"

"Why, of course I will, John," Annie answered. "You know I'm rather a busy person. I often say to Henry I don't know where the time goes to."

John nodded; he'd heard her say so a hundred times, and every time thought it a futile remark.

"But if you can't help your own people, who can you help, I'd like to know? *I* always do say blood is thicker than water," she finished, brilliantly.

"Rather," agreed John. "Oh, yes—I want to see Henry."

"Why, now here he is, earlier than usual. Isn't that a funny thing?" Annie's last words floated back as she dived into the hall to open the door for her husband.

"Good-day, John," said Henry, "do you want me?"

"Hallo!" John answered. "Yes, some time or other; I'm wanting to make a will."

"Oh, John," broke in Annie, "are you ill, then?"

Henry rose in John's estimation by not even glancing at his wife.

"I'm all right, thanks, Annie," he answered, gravely, "only in case——"

"Of course, it's well to be prepared. You never know what may happen. But if you two are going to talk business, I'll leave you."

And with this roguish threat, she bustled away.

"I'm sending Jan to school," John volunteered.

"Sarah's leaving?" said Henry in a questioning voice. He didn't question whether she were leaving or not, he knew she was, but whether her leaving was the cause of Jan's going to school.

John understood. "Yes, partly. Don't change, I say, until there's a push from behind or an opening in front. Sarah's the push—the opening will come—if it doesn't, I'll make it."

"I sometimes wish," began Henry; then stopped at the entry of the housemaid.

"The mistress says, sir, will Mr. John stay to supper?"

"Will you, John? You're welcome," Henry asked.

"No, thanks," John answered, "I'll be getting along. Busy place, the 'Plas,' nowadays. Sarah's wedding is the day after to-morrow—eh, what! She's a good girl, too. I wish she'd struck something better than that drunken lout."

"Will you look round at the office to-morrow then?" asked Henry.

"Righto," John called. "Good-night."

But a sudden violent bilious attack kept Henry

indoors for the next couple of days, and when John presented himself at the office, Henry's partner attended to him. John produced half a sheet of paper. "It's my Will," he said. "I hate all the usual muddle—call in another witness, will you?"

"It's rather unusual, Mr. Owen," the lawyer hummed and hawed.

"What's that to me," said John, "as long as it's legal?"

He had his own way, and when the document had been signed and sealed, John walked out into the street, with a curious feeling that it was nearly time for him to die, since he'd made arrangements for after his death.

But the events of the evening drove all thoughts of dying out of his head.

Sarah had been out, and she broke into the dining-room about half-past eight, her face the colour of whey, her eyes wild and tearless.

"He's gone back on me," she said in a hoarse, cracked voice, "he won't do it."

"Where is he?" said John.

"Gone," muttered Sarah. "Gone back home, he is. He's in drink. He says as he won't do it to-morrow."

"Why?" John asked. Men like Davy Jones have specious reasons for their sins.

"It's along of Harry," Sarah answered in a dull, hopeless way. "Harry—my boy."

"Sarah!" John commanded her, "go upstairs to bed and stay there. Now which way did he go?"

"You won't go for to hurt 'im, Master," Sarah cried.

"No! but we won't take risks. Which way did he go?"

"By 'Three Gates,'" said Sarah.

John was a good walker, and ten minutes later he came upon Davy Jones lurching home. John passed him, went on a hundred yards, then turned and met him.

"Hallo, Davy," he cried—"you out to-night!"

"Devening, Mis'er Owen," hiccoughed Davy.

"Look here, my lad," said John, "I'd better see you home," and linking his arm through that of the drunken man, he turned him round and drew him along with him toward the "Plas."

"No, this way," protested Davy.

John's grasp tightened like a vise. "That's all right, my friend, you're on the right road now," was his answer.

Davy struggled, kicked, and wailed, but he was powerless to resist. And within half-an-hour John propelled him into the house, into the dining-room and locked the door.

Only two people ever knew what went on at the "Plas" that night, and neither of those ever mentioned it.

But it was the talk of Brynavon that Sarah came to her wedding looking like a corpse, and

that John walked to the Chapel with his arm linked through that of his brother-in-law and stood beside him until the couple were declared man and wife. Then he stepped back and Sarah lurched forward and fell in a faint at the feet of her husband.

That night, as a reward for his labours, John went for an hour to the "Blue Boar" and was found at eleven o'clock lying in the road. He was unconscious with severe wounds on the head, and the inference was that some vehicle had run him down in the dark.

Doctor Harris was called and shook his head, after a very short examination.

"Something passed right over him, poor devil," he said.

An hour later John opened his eyes. "My number up?" he asked.

Doctor Harris nodded; he never could lie—anyhow not to old John.

"Bring me Jan," said John.

And since there was no time to lose, Jan was wrapped in a blanket and carried in.

John motioned for them to put the child beside him. "Now go," he whispered, "and come back in a quarter of an hour."

"You ill, Daddy?" asked Jan, pointing to his bandaged head.

"Not much, old girl," John answered, "but I've a secret to tell you."

"Lovely fun," gurgled Jan, snuggling down by him.

"Do you remember, Jan," he went on, "that time last winter, when you and I read voyages and discoveries together? It was first-rate, wasn't it?"

Jan nodded. "Rather, Daddy."

"Well, my pet, I'm going on a very exciting voyage quite soon."

Jan sat bolt upright. "Oh, Daddy—by sea! Me, too, Daddy," she coaxed.

"No luck, old girl," he answered. "This is a queer sort of journey—I must go alone."

"Daddy," she gasped, "you'll be like Stanley in his canoe—do you remember?"

He cut her short.

"This is going to be a really exciting journey. Guess whom I'm going to meet. Mother!"

Jan gazed at her father with wide eyes in which horror dawned slowly—then flung herself back beside him, sobbing, "Oh, Daddy, Daddy, don't go—stay with me, Daddy."

John bit his lip till it bled. Then with pain in every movement he raised one arm and with his hand smoothed Jan's rumpled hair.

"Listen, darling," he whispered, master of himself again. "You and I have been together ten whole lovely years—just think of it, and all the while poor little Mother has been watching on the other side all alone, waiting for one of us."

Jan was interested and stopped crying to listen.

John saw his chance and went on quickly: "Now it's her turn, Sweetness. I'm treating you like a real grown-up person, and telling you all about it, because I want you to promise me to do your very best here till your time for the voyage comes."

But Jan's baby soul welled over with bitterness. "I'm only ten," she said—"it may be heaps of years."

Her father shuddered.

"Yes—it may be a long time—I hope it will be. You see—I want you to grow up into a fine, good girl. And all the time Mother and I will be watching"—his voice sank lower—"and saying to one another—'Look at Jan—Look at our darling little girl!' And when your time comes, Jan, and we see your boat nearing the shore—Oh, Jan!"

He stopped; Jan's sobbing had given place to deep, regular breathing. She had cried herself to sleep.

John lay still; they'd come and fetch her in a minute—till then it was good to have her by him. And Jan—— Was it really Jan?

Five minutes later Doctor Harris and a nurse he had summoned crept back into the quiet room.

A glance at the bed showed them that while the child slept John had already started on the journey.

## CHAPTER VI

COMING back after mid-term is rotten, my dear," announced Clare Goodyer.

"Well, my dear, it'srottener to stick here during mid-term, I can tell you." Olive McEvoy's tone was final.

"Yes, you poor thing. Of course I had a priceless time."

"Lucky beggar!"

"My sister looked perfectly ripping," swept on Clare, "long train, you know—and Dick was home—he's at school in Wales and he brought along the most ripping boy—John Owen. It was their half-term, too."

"My dear, how ripping! I do envy you," said Olive, disconsolately. "Of course, in a way, it wasn't bad. I played tennis all Saturday afternoon and knocked Nesta Vaughan out of the tournament. She was as sick as a cat."

Clare's eyes sparkled. "I bet she was—what a lark!"

"All the decent mistresses went away; they always do," Olive remarked.

"What about Miss Saunders?" accused Clare.

"Oh, well, I'd forgotten her. Yes, she did

stay.” Olive’s air of indifference was rather overdone.

“Did you walk round the garden with her? Lucky brute,” said Clare, savagely, taking Olive’s blush as an answer in the affirmative. “Oh, there’s Molly. Hallo, Molly! Miss Saunders didn’t go away, and Olive walked round with her to-day.”

“Lucky brute,” remarked Molly, taking off her hat. “My dears, I had a priceless time!”

“How ripping,” chorused Olive and Clare.

They were standing in the broad gravel terrace in front of the school, greeting arrivals who had been lucky enough to get away for the half-term holiday. Everyone was talking at once—even the members of the Staff, who had arrived up from the station in cabs, dressed in wonderful costumes which the school never saw in normal times. There was Miss Read (in a flowered voile and parasol), who was engaged to the secretary of a Member of Parliament, and talked politics with the air of one in the know. She was speaking to Miss Rivers—new last term—who had played centre forward for the Girton hockey team. She had spent her mid-term golfing, her clubs hung on her arm. “Bogey three—a 2 yard putt,” and “a magnificent drive, my dear,” occurred again and again in her conversation.

She was listened to without enthusiasm, because no one else on the Staff played golf, and as

Miss Talbot, the Geography mistress, afterward confided to Miss Clark Junior School, "That Rivers woman bores me stiff. I never can remember what a bogey is."

On the big triangular piece of grass beyond the terrace was a crowd of girls watching the last heat of the half-term tennis tournament, while at the apex of the triangle, where it was too narrow for a tennis court, the junior school children were playing cricket with an unspliced bat and tennis-ball. But if the batter hit to the left, the ball went over the hedge into the road—if straight, on to the tennis court—if to the right, on to the terrace among the groups of girls. A small girl of eleven had just dived in between Molly and Clare, and Olive, from the superior pinnacle of fourteen years, remarked: "Aren't these kids just the limit?" when a four-wheeler rumbled up the slope past the lodge, and along the terrace to the front door.

Terrific cheering from the tennis courts proclaimed a victory, and the scattered groups of girls ran toward the court.

"Come on," said Olive, "let's see who's won."

"I forgot," said Clare, standing still, "John Owen—that boy——"

Olive nudged Molly. "Clare's absolutely smashed on John Owen," she whispered.

"All right! Olive McEvoy," said Clare, angrily,

"don't ask me to walk with you this half, that's all."

Olive grinned. "Don't be stuffy, Clare. I was only rotting."

"Oh, well, then," Clare was half appeased; "I was going to say John Owen said his cousin was coming here this half and I expect that's her!"

"Will she be any good for the Form tennis match?" Olive was Games Captain in Form IV and of a practical turn of mind.

"She's only a kid," said Clare, "but her father died or something. I forget exactly."

The big bell clanged at that moment and the girls trooped in, flushed and talking eagerly. They thronged the corridors and stood laughing and calling to one another on the steps leading to the dining-room where supper awaited them.

Jan stood in the hall, clasping Sarah tightly by the hand, watching them with growing wonder.

"Sarah," she whispered, "aren't there lots and lots—or do the same ones keep coming to and fro?"

"I don't know, Miss Jan," Sarah answered. "I hope the lady won't be long, I do—I'm fit to drop."

Jan drew closer. "You won't go to-night, Sarah?" she asked.

"No, no, Miss Jan, come you; I'll stay as long as you like."

"There's Davy Jones, Sarah," Jan reminded

her. And, indeed, the events of the past week—John's death and funeral, the long journey from Brynavon to Paddington, then across London in a taxi, and finally down to Kent, had driven all thoughts of her husband and step-child out of Sarah's mind.

But most astounding of all had been the reading of John's Will, naming Sarah "sole guardian of my child!" followed by the words "My sister-in-law, who has helped me so greatly, will appreciate the reasons for this choice."

Annie had been staggered when the Will was read to her. "Sarah—sole guardian," she cried. "That can't be right."

Mr. Griffiths showed her the paper. Annie stared at the big, bold writing, and puckered her forehead in an effort to imagine what she was meant to understand.

Henry turned away. It was all very well for old buffers to talk about "not saying anything but good of the dead." Henry would have liked to shout aloud a stream of angry abuse against his dead brother. John wouldn't hear it, but it would upset Annie, and loyalty kept his mouth closed. All the same, he understood. John had always played up to Annie; he'd never appreciated her, but keeping in mind her offer to take Jan, he'd always given the impression of deferring to her. And since he meant to make Sarah guardian, he put in that clause to placate Annie. "It

was an unworthy act," Henry repeated to himself, "unbecoming to a gentleman and an Owen."

"Poor fellow," Annie sighed. "I'll admit to you, Mr. Griffiths, I don't understand it. But depend upon it—I said something and he twisted it—poor fellow!" Annie wiped one eye with a black-edged handkerchief. "Indeed, he thought a lot of me, didn't he, Henry?" she answered.

"Yes," answered her husband quickly. "Poor old John," he added, as it occurred to him with a rare flash of intuition that he and John were really in the same boat. For with a person owning such a sensitive temperament as Annie did, prevarication was so much the simplest course.

Mr. Griffiths had explained to Sarah what sole guardian meant, and the responsibility had weighed heavily on her ever since, but never so much as when she stood with Jan waiting to see Miss Blakeborough.

Then a door to the right opened, and Miss Blakeborough came out, tall and slim, with dark hair parted in the middle and drawn loosely back to her neck. She was very proud of her hair, but then she was proud of herself altogether, of her brain—her organizing power, her business ability, her figure and face, but most of all, of her personality and the way she had with her. Obstreperous children quieted at her approach, the shy unbent, and the silent babbled like brooks.

"Come in, will you?" she said, smiling at Jan. "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Yes, mum," said Sarah, following her into her pleasant room.

"So this is Jan, is it?" went on Miss Blakeborough.

It was a rhetorical question, but one of those which could have done with an answer. Jan, however, made no reply.

"I hope you'll be very happy with us, Jan," continued Miss Blakeborough, smiling at the small girl in heavy mourning.

"Say thank you, Miss Jan," prompted Sarah.

"Thank you," said Jan, obediently. Then, turning to Sarah, she said in a tired way, "Sarah, I don't like this. Come home."

Sarah gave a quick look at the Head Mistress, who stood up and came over to Jan.

"Jan," she said, "stay with me a little bit to see how you like it."

"I shan't like it," said Jan, wearily.

"Miss Jan!" admonished Sarah.

"If we've got to stay, Sarah," the child went on, "let's go to bed."

Sarah and Jan occupied the guest room that night, and next morning Sarah left. Jan only said, "Yes, there's Davy and Elvira," when told of it, and when Sarah wavered, Miss Blakeborough urged, "She'll settle down quickly once you've gone."

Sarah did her best to keep the scorn out of her eyes, but the tone in which she said, "Very well, mum," was openly contemptuous.

"I'll fetch you, Miss Jan, if you want to come," she said, kissing Jan.

"Take care of Dio," said Jan. "Good-bye."

It may here be remarked that when Sarah reached home, Dio was dead. He had been born in the "Plas," reared there, and grown old beside John Owen. And adapting the famous epitaph—

To live after him he tried,  
Liked it not and died

Jan did not send for Sarah. She wrote curious little letters, with the dispassionate air of a grown-up person, but she hated school.

John had fired her imagination, and she dreamt day and night of Daddy and Mother in that wonderful seaside place together, and enjoying themselves, while she was here with people who hadn't known Daddy, nor the "Plas," nor Dio, nor Sarah.

The lessons did not trouble her. She was much better grounded than most of the other children, but the atmosphere was so different. Here Jan was back again in Form II, and Miss Clark talked to them as if they were babies of budding intelligence.

In the village school, Jan had been Standard IV among children who loved a game with the best,

but who regarded themselves as on the highroad to maturity.

For instance, when Mrs. Richards' fifth baby came, Bessie, then aged ten, stayed home from school and did all the housework, including the cooking and the care of the nose-disjoined "old baby" of fourteen months.

Billy Williams was thirteen and a giant in the Seventh Standard, but he was up milking at five, and had taken the cans to the station before school.

"Wake up, Jan," cried Miss Clark, brightly. "I believe you're dreaming."

Jan looked up slowly. "Yes, teacher," she answered.

There was a roar of laughter from the class.

"You don't call me 'teacher,'" said Miss Clark.

"Why not?" Jan asked.

"Because you call me by my name, Miss Clark."

"Yes, Miss Clark," said Jan.

"Now, children," began Miss Clark, "we're going to have a recitation-lesson. You like that, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Clark," said the class in chorus; Jan alone was silent.

"I'm going to teach you a piece of poetry called 'My Bed Is Like a Little Boat.' It was written by a man named Robert Louis Stevenson."

In an instant Jan's mind flew back to last

winter, when she had read "Kidnapped" sitting in her little chair on one side of the fire, with Daddy on the other to help with the big words, and while the rest of the class repeated after Miss Clark:

My bed is like a little boat,  
Nurse helps me in when I embark,

Jan was wandering in fancy over the heather with Alan Breck and David Balfour.

"I'm sure you like that, don't you?" asked Miss Clark at the end of the lesson, and twenty good little girls who came from Upper Middle Class homes answered, "Yes, Miss Clark."

Something prompted Miss Clark to say, "Do you like it, Jan?" to which the child truthfully replied, "No, thank you, Miss Clark."

Nature Study was no better. Miss Clark showed the class a robin's nest she had found, and talked about "robin red-breasts" and crumbs and lining the nest, etc., etc. And then the class took out their books and drew a nest, with a bird balancing on the edge of it, and they chalked the breast red, and enjoyed themselves.

But the "Plas" garden had been full of real nests—John had known the name and habits of every bird in the countryside; the robins had grown so bold last winter that they had often come right in to the kitchen. Jan's indifference was palpable and Miss Clark could not ignore it.

"Bother that child," she thought, "I do wish she'd buck up."

But Jan did not buck up, and at last Miss Clark consulted Miss Blakeborough.

"I can't make any headway with that new child, Jan Owen," she admitted, reluctantly.

"What's the matter?" asked the Head. "She's rather an unresponsive little person, of course."

"She's superior," groaned Miss Clark.

"Not really." The Head spoke with conviction, but then she habitually spoke up for her girls. "She's unhappy, and homesick. Send her to me. I'll try my luck with her."

"Miss Blakeborough is really wonderful with the children," Miss Clark announced to the Staff Room when she'd sent Jan along.

But to-day the Head failed to arouse any spark of life in Jan, who listened to everything she said, and replied: "Yes, Miss Blakeborough," and "No, Miss Blakeborough," but as she was leaving the room, she turned: "How long do people live?" she asked in the tone of one equal addressing another.

Miss Blakeborough was startled, but respected the tone. It was the first voluntary remark Jan had made.

"It differs, of course," she answered, "but the Bible says three-score years and ten—that's seventy, you know."

"Thank you," said Jan, but her heart sank.  
That afternoon she wrote to John:

DEAR JOHN:

I do not like school.

Miss Blakeborough says people ought to live seventy years.  
It is a long time.

Your loving

JAN.

She wrote in the garden, sitting on the grass nursing her writing block on her knee, while all round her played the children of her Form. Everything had changed—even the games.

On the way home from school along the road Jan had played lovely games with the village children—Bull-dicks—Tig—and "Who's going round my poultry-house—Only Polly Perkins." Not even the boys in Jan's school played cricket, and there are still parts of Wales, Brynavon, for instance, to which tennis has not yet travelled.

Miss Blakeborough was standing at her window watching the girls. She had a fine position as moulder of the destinies of these young lives. How she loved them all—not individually, of course, but en masse. They were her girls—her school—her seed-plot in the big garden. As her eye travelled round it rested on Jan—a small, black figure—alone.

Form II were playing cricket with a surprising amount of noise. Mona McEvoy—Olive's

younger sister—had just made six runs, because the ball had stuck up in the may-tree, when a maid came to say that Miss Blakeborough wished to speak to her.

There was more consternation in Form II than is usually compatible with clean hands and a pure heart, and as Mona knocked at the door her outlook on life was gloomy.

Miss Blakeborough reassured her at once. "Mona," she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, Miss Blakeborough." The small girl with her hot, flushed face and rumpled hair was very earnest.

"It's about Jan Owen, the new girl."

"Yes, Miss Blakeborough," but Mona's tone registered to the Head's quick understanding the low degree of Jan's popularity.

"I think she's shy; go and ask her to play with you. Don't say I sent you, just do it on your own, will you?"

"She won't play, Miss Blakeborough," Mona burst in with wide-open eyes. "She says——"

"Go and ask her again—I should," the Head advised.

But from her window she saw Mona's advances refused, and Jan stood up and walked away out of sight.

John received Jan's letter at breakfast time on Saturday morning, and he thought hard during

the meal, with there sult that he caught the twelve o'clock express to Paddington. He was sixteen now, and in the Upper Fifth. As he sat back in the corner of a third-class smoker, he hoped that his tracks would be covered till Monday morning.

As luck would have it, he had an exeat for the whole day Saturday—Goodyer had promised to sign on for him on Sunday, and John proposed to travel back to S. Wales by the night train on Sunday and present himself at Monday's school without undue attention.

It was quite a good plan, and it was characteristic of John that when he had made his arrangements he put the matter from his mind, and devoted himself to the question in hand—Jan.

He'd gone home for his uncle's funeral and seen Jan then, and he'd sent her a box of toffee to school which she hadn't acknowledged, because he'd stuck a slip of paper "With love from John," inside the tin, and the paper had stuck to the toffee, and Jan had thrown it away without looking at it, and hadn't known from whom the sweets came.

The train was late at Paddington, and John missed his connection and landed down in Kent at 9:30 when all the girls were in bed.

He stood a minute or two by the lodge gate deliberating. He had his return ticket and five shillings. In addition, he was hungry and did not know where to go. But it never occurred to him to regret having come.

It was a glorious summer's night—the air heavy with a hundred scents, while from the clump of bushes on the hill a nightingale sang to his mate.

Miss Blakeborough was strolling round the garden—glad of a few minutes' respite from companionship. She had the finest Staff in the world—loyal and keen—but like her favourite R.L.S., she found “enthusiasm wearing”—at least at the end of the week.

And to-night her thoughts were far away. She had arranged her summer holiday, and in fulfilment of a long-standing promise, she was going with her family to Switzerland—to Campfer, a little village in the Engadine, a good centre for walks, expeditions, and climbing.

As she came along the terrace, she saw John standing just inside the gate, his head thrown back, his hands clasped behind him, while the moonlight streaming on to his face revived some forgotten memory, and she walked down to the gate.

“Are you waiting for anybody?” she asked.

“No, thanks,” John answered. “I wanted to see someone, but it's too late. That's a nightingale, isn't it?” he asked, as the bird's song began again; “I never heard one before.”

Miss Blakeborough nodded. “Do you mean someone in the school?” Of whom did this boy remind her?

“Yes,” John answered, though the nightingale

had half his attention. "It's Jan—Jan Owen—I'm her cousin."

Ah! Miss Blakeborough understood the likeness well enough; it had been on another such night as this in Cambridge—after an illustrated lecture on someone's travels in the Ægean—

"Where are you staying?" she asked, coming to earth with a bump.

"Oh," said John, "I don't know—anywhere."

"But where are you going to sleep?" Miss Blakeborough demanded.

"There's a hay-rick," John began, confidentially.

Miss Blakeborough stared at him with a growing envy in her eyes.

"Lord!" she thought, "what wouldn't I give to be young again." (She was thirty-five.) And to John she said: "Come in; have you had supper?"

The cleverest people make the biggest mistakes, ignore the more obvious openings, and fail to see the facts which stare them in the face. And in some way or other it never occurred to Miss Blakeborough that John's visit was not made with the concurrence of the authorities under whose rule he was supposed to be. Boys' schools are run on such different lines from girls'—and John mentioned his school and home freely.

Jan was excused from church next day and spent the morning in the garden with her cousin.

John felt physically sick at the sight of her white

unhappy face. Human suffering appalled him, he hated the feeling of impotence before those troubles which must needs come.

They sat hand in hand on the bank. Jan didn't talk and John was afraid to begin.

"I know you don't like school," he said at last, "but can't you possibly make it do, dear, till I'm a man?"

Jan turned to him with a faint flicker of interest. "What then?" she asked.

"I could take you away," John answered, quickly, "right away—and we'd live together and you should keep house for me, and I'd look after you."

Jan gripped his hand with all her puny might.

"John," she cried, "is it truth and honour; is it really and truly?"

"Honour bright, Jan!" the boy promised, gravely. Whereupon Jan burst into a flood of tears. There was hope in the land yet, some time she'd go back home again and look after John. John appreciated the reason for Jan's crying and didn't try to soothe her. But presently he told her as a dead secret about the time he'd run away from school and how her father had talked to him and taken him back. And Jan laughed at the idea of Aunt Annie sitting in the dining-room, while John, who was supposed to be at school, was lying in bed upstairs. And then together they sketched the house they'd live in and what John would do and what Jan would do and when Jan said, "It

won't be long, will it, John?" he answered. "Honour bright, it shan't be long."

"Goodness me," groaned Miss Clark later, catching sight of Jan's red eyes, "I hope he's not been upsetting that child any more."

"You take your children too much to heart, my dear," and Miss Rivers yawned. "Take my advice and run some hobby unconnected with school. Now golf——"

"Excuse me," apologized Miss Clark, "but I must go in," and she hurried away. But as she lay on her bed till lunchtime with a new novel, she must have forgotten (if she ever knew) the urgent business that had called her away.

"Goodness gracious," said Molly, "look, there's a boy. Who's he with—— Oh, that new kid."

Clare Goodyer turned a vivid pink. "I do believe it's John Owen," she said. "You know—the boy who came home on half-term."

"Molly," Olive chanted, with what was regrettably near a wink, "I think you and I, my child, will be as Mademoiselle says 'de trop.'"

"Don't be such beasts," hissed Clare. "Oh, hallo, John," she said, suddenly changing her tone as John and Jan came toward her.

"Hallo, Clare!" John greeted her, "I didn't know you were here!"

"Forgotten, you mean," Clare answered, dimpling into a smile. "I know I told you. What are you doing?"

"I came to see Jan—she's my cousin. There, now, you'd forgotten."

"No, I hadn't." Truth was Clare's strong point, but she couldn't explain to John that Fourth Form girls did not have much in common with Lower School kids. John ought to have known that, but trifles of that sort never concerned him.

"All right," said John with a grin, suddenly seeing the point she had not made, "it doesn't matter."

"But I will," protested Clare. "I'd like to. She's your cousin," but as she said it, the reason lay in the pronoun.

That afternoon John said good-bye to Miss Blakeborough in the most charming way and thanked her warmly for her kindness.

"Jan will be happier now, won't you, Jan?" he said.

"Oh, yes, John, dear," the child answered, "quite happy now."

Miss Blakeborough wanted to ask how it had been done, for future reference, but didn't like to, so said "Good-bye" instead.

Jan took him to the gate. She walked in silence, with a little frown on her forehead. John squeezed the small hand he was holding. "All serene, darling?" he asked.

Jan stood still. "John," she said, breathlessly, growing rather pale, "tell me, John—when you're a properly grown man——"

"You shall keep house, darling," he broke in to assure her.

"You wouldn't have two people to keep house for you, John?" she inquired, anxiously.

"Rather not," said John. "You see, Jan, a man has the person he loves best in all the world to keep his house, and he can't love more than one—at a time," he added with unintentional cynicism.

Jan's face was transfigured. "And it's me!" she cried. "That Clare girl shan't come."

"You're my very bestest," he said, and he meant it, though the kiss Clare had given him in the passage was still hot on his cheek.

It was from this time forward that Jan began to give trouble. She was noisy and disregarded the rules.

But when Miss Clark said to her, "You weren't so naughty Jan, when you first came," Jan replied, naïvely, "No, Miss Clark, but you see—now I'm happy."

## CHAPTER VII

**W**HEN John turned up at school on Monday morning, he found, as Dick Goodyer managed to whisper to him, "Cain raised and the hell of a row" awaiting him.

By some freak of mischance Annie had decided very suddenly to spend a week with an old school-friend who lived not far from the school. What more natural, then, than that she should walk over on Sunday after Chapel to see John, who was not forthcoming?

Investigation showed that he had signed on for breakfast, but further inquiries led to the theory that the signature was a forgery

Dick Goodyer, whose handwriting was known, denied it when accused, not from any wish to lie, but in the thin hope of saving John. But Dick was naturally truthful, and made a hash of it by contradicting himself every second word, till when the Head Master said bluntly, "When is he coming back?"—Dick answered "Monday."

"It was a rotten catch!" he growled to himself when he had been dismissed.

Doctor Jones returned to Mrs. Owen. The

smile of expectancy on her face died away when she saw that John was not there.

The next five minutes were painful for both.

"But where can he have gone?" Annie cried, fighting down her tears. "He didn't know I was coming," she challenged him, as if that in itself were an excuse, and the Head—unmarried, by the way—reflected on the queer freak of nature which allowed only unreasonable and unreasoning creatures to carry on the race.

"It's serious, Mrs. Owen," he told her; "your son is no longer a child and so far he has never realized to any degree the responsibilities which, as a senior boy, devolve upon him. I have the tone of my school to consider."

"We sent him to you to be taught," Annie flashed back. "His father and I—we entrusted him to you. It was your duty to make him realize. Have you failed, too?"

The last word was a bitter admission and Doctor Jones noticed it. There were patches of bright colour on her cheeks as she sat bolt upright, quivering with the same anger which prompts a tigress to defend her cubs. And she was full of fears for John and so very disappointed not to see him.

Doctor Jones pursed up his lips and considered. "There is reason in what you say, Mrs. Owen," he remarked at last. "Everything will depend on where John has been and what he has to say for himself."

And then John refused to tell. He admitted he'd been away, at last when pressed even acknowledged that he'd been to London, but would give no further information. The Head Master looked at him reflectively, as if trying to sum up some curious hitherto unknown species.

"Think it over, Owen," he advised, kindly; "try and look forward and see what the consequence of such—er—obstinacy must be. I have no wish to threaten you—" He paused significantly.

Annie, who had stayed for the interview, clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. "If they expel him," she thought, "I shall never hold up my head again."

John ran his fingers through his hair. Here, if you like, was the father and mother of a fix. To tell the truth was out of the question. He simply couldn't speak to these people of Jan—of the almost sacred feeling he had for his little cousin. And it wasn't only because she was Jan, but because she was the daughter of John Owen.

He wrinkled his face in perplexity. If only he didn't mind lies, he could have spun them a fine yarn.

He could say he'd been to the station—and Tommy Mammy, the old porter, had been struggling with luggage and John had stepped into the van to help—and before he knew—heigh-presto, he was whirled away up to London. But

the train to London wasn't a non-stop, he objected—no, that wouldn't hold water. He'd have to try another!

Annie watched him with a sinking heart. She knew from experience that when John set his jaw as he was doing now nothing would induce him to budge out of his own course.

"Well, Owen," Doctor Jones broke in upon John's thoughts, "have you come to your senses?"

John started. "I can't, sir," he began.

"John," pleaded his mother, "tell me, darling. Tell Mother where you went."

For a second the boy wavered, then he walked across the room to where Annie was sitting.

"I can't tell you, Mother," he said, taking her hand and rubbing it against his cheek, "if I could, you know you would be the one I'd tell. I did nothing to shame you, dear."

It would have been humiliating to urge him further, but Doctor Jones was impressed.

John, with his charming, caressing way, was a revelation to him. He had not realized that there was this side to the boy's character. In all his long experience Doctor Jones had never before met an ill-doer with the quiet, assured manner John was showing. He seemed to be drawing on reserves of strength unknown to his hearers, and his conscience—always supposing he possessed one—was unburdened by his sin.

The Head Master rubbed his smooth chin re-

flectively. "Look here, Owen," he said, laying a hand on John's shoulder, "this is a bigger thing than you realize. Expulsion (Annie gasped) follows a man all his life. I don't know where you've been, but I must know. You won't tell me?" (as John shifted impatiently) "Not now—but I'm going to give you a whole week to think it over."

"Thank you, sir." John's eyes were very bright and the words were spoken automatically.

"I want your son to go home with you now, Mrs. Owen," Doctor Jones went on, "and he may come back within the week if he is prepared to say where he went last Sunday. That is the most I can do for you, and I do assure you, Mrs. Owen, that I am stretching discipline to its utmost limit."

Annie murmured an indistinct reply, and the room and its occupants were blurred in a mist of tears.

"Who hath sinned, this man or his father?" Was it John's own fault or Henry's or Henry's father's? Perhaps it was her own fault, she should have taught him better, but she couldn't—she'd done her best and failed.

And over all her own personal unhappiness, Brynavon's attitude toward John lay like a pall. They'd be astonished to see him and curious as to why he had come home, and the more Annie would try to hide it, the deeper they would dig and then,

all of a sudden, John would be sure to announce the truth, naked and hateful, to someone, and in a day the whole town would know about it.

They'd call and sympathize with her, not out loud in words, but in subtle intonations and kindly looks. And Willie Griffiths taught in Sunday School and had just taken a scholarship to Abery-stwyth!

It was unbearable, it was disgraceful of John. And then through her tears she saw his face, young and pure, with the corners of his mouth drooping a little, and the dreamy eyes looking from her to Doctor Jones and back again in wistful inquiry. He was immeasurably far away, out beyond her reach, and the knowledge stabbed her. If she wasn't careful she'd lose him altogether.

"Darling," she cried, in an attempt to reach him, "darling, I am trying to understand."

Henry was as puzzled as his wife, but far less sympathetic.

"I'd like to lay a stick across your back, my lad, and teach you," he said, eying his son dispassionately.

John did not answer. He was taller than his father, and he might have reminded him, only Henry remembered quite well that in the past the application of the rod had not been as resultful as Solomon had seemed to think it would be.

Supper was a dreadful farce. Henry sat in gloomy silence. Annie wore a pained expression

and merely toyed with her food, and both, with irritated wonder, watched John make a hearty meal, in apparent unconsciousness of the strained atmosphere around him..

"If you don't mind, Mother, I'll take a stroll," he said after supper.

"I do mind, sir," snapped Henry, "if you have no sense of shame, I have."

John flushed and clasped the back of his chair.  
"It's not quite 'shame,' Father——"

"Hold your tongue, sir, I say it is shame to have my son expelled from school——"

John left the room, closing the door quietly behind him, and went out whistling between his teeth.

"He'll tell me, Henry—I'm sure he'll tell me." Annie was trying to buoy up her own courage, but Henry knew better.

"He'll never tell, the young fool."

"But, Henry, where can he have been?"

"God knows—I don't."

Annie stiffened, but Henry's blasphemy faded before a sickening fear that had arisen in her mind.

"You don't think, do you, that he was taken there, that he did wrong?"

"No, I don't," Henry answered with decision, "the boy's not sinful—he's silly. He's risking everything for some damned quixotic notion. For the life of me I can't think what it can be."

And as he lay still that night, trying not to disturb Annie—who scarcely dared to breathe for fear of waking him—Henry found himself trying to remember what his brother John had done as a boy, to see if that would give a clue.

John's appearance in Brynavon had exactly the effect that Annie had feared. Everyone knew that schools did not close until the end of July, so why was John Owen home at the beginning, looking very well, too, indeed!

The Brynavon ladies were curious, but the curiosity of a country town is a complex affair. It is prompted partly by an interest in other people, since provincial life has a narrow radius, and comparatively few people have the salt within themselves.

There is kindness behind it, too, inasmuch as you and I, being residents in the same town, attending the same Chapel, and the same, the one and only, dressmaker, are integral parts of one another's life, and it is second nature to me to dance to your piping and lament to your mourning. But I must know the tune, and if you will not tell me, I must find out for myself, or guess and act accordingly.

And when Mrs. Griffiths put on her best bonnet and walked up to call upon Mrs. Owen, she wore the air of one who intends to get to the root of the matter.

"My dear Mrs. Owen," she said, when her ample

person was settled on the drawing-room sofa, “you’re not looking at all well to-day.”

It was a skilful throw, but Annie was wary.

“It’s the heat! I do feel a little bit done up, but there—what can you expect?”

“Indeed, I sometimes think you do too much, Mrs. Owen.”

“We hope to get away in August—that is, if Mr. Owen can spare the time. Are you going away?”

“Yes, we’re going to Llandrindod for a fortnight—Mr. Griffiths, Willie, and myself.”

“Very nice, too. How is Willie?”

The moment the question had passed her lips Annie saw her mistake, and at the same minute Mrs. Griffiths took her advantage.

“Willie is very well, thank you, dear Mrs. Owen. You know we were so pleased about his examination. Did you hear about it?”

Considering that Mrs. Griffiths had already told Annie twice, her husband having previously mentioned it to Henry, Annie said, “Yes, dear, it is good. I don’t wonder you’re pleased.”

“He was so poorly the day he started,” said Mrs. Griffiths, beginning from the beginning, “that I said to his father—‘The boy’s not fit to go, William.’ And Willie said: ‘I must try, Mother.’ So I said: ‘Very well, then, you shall’—and would you believe it, Mrs. Owen, that boy came out top, swept the board,” and Mrs. Griffiths made a wonderful sweeping movement with

her hands, indicative of Willie's success, and thereby upset a vase of flowers on the table.

"How is John?" she asked, when the water had been mopped up and the flowers taken away.

"He's home for a week," Annie answered.

"Oh, not well, I suppose?"

"Well," Annie's pursed-up lips might have meant anything, "we thought it better to have him home just for a time. Not delicate, but a very highly strung boy, you know."

Mrs. Griffiths nodded several times in a comprehending way.

"Yes, of course, he always was difficult. I mean, of course, dear Mrs. Owen, that John always needed care. I heard you say so a dozen times."

Annie rose to the occasion with magnificent dignity.

"It is a mother's privilege," she said. "I always feel that a boy of John's calibre" (good word that!) "has, with the right guidance, an infinite capacity for good or evil. But I'll admit to you, Mrs. Griffiths, that I am sometimes tempted to envy you your Willie—with his placid, easy temperament. Do let me give you another cup of tea."

While Annie was fighting his battles for him at home, John was on his way to Pentre Fawr to see Sarah. He didn't particularly want to see her, in fact he didn't particularly want to see any-

thing or anybody—only to be left alone and to be free to go his own way. That was it—he wanted freedom—not to do anything specially but to have time to be. John hated living in Brynavon, though he loved the place. He could have been so happy there, idling away his life in dilettante hobbies and dreamy reflections.

But life on the Parade with hot dinner at one o'clock—and Chapel on Sundays—every Sunday, and bowing and scraping to the right people, and being condescending within the Christian limit to those who didn't matter—John loathed it all.

If he had wanted his freedom for some purpose, they might have understood, but it was an end in itself; he broke their laws for the sake of breaking them. He was young, crude, and as unhappy as a sun-worshipper can be on a glorious summer's day.

Sarah greeted him with all the effusion of which she was capable and that is not saying much.

"Please to come in, Master John," she said.  
"Elvira, bring Master John a glass of milk."

The sound of clogs tapping on the stone floor showed that Elvira had heard and was obeying.

John sat on the settle in the long, dark kitchen, while opposite him Sarah drew up a chair, and sat with her hands folded, her wedding-ring well in evidence. It was a habitual attitude of hers, as if to show the world the bargain she had secured. The price was no one's concern but her own, but there was an ugly bruise under one eye.

"Pretty well, Sarah?" the boy asked.

"Yes, thank you, Master John. But I had a nasty accident. Slipped and fell, I did, hitting my head on the table." She smoothed the bruise gently, and looked at John with eyes which asked him to believe her lie.

John understood all right.

"Bad luck, Sarah! Oh, thank you most awfully," this to Elvira, a buxom girl of fifteen who handed him a glass of milk. There was a suspicion of Jan in her looks—Jan broadened and made more coarse—but she had the same heavy black hair and dark eyes, though hers beckoned and enticed.

John raised the glass of milk, "Happy days," he said, turning first to Sarah and then to Elvira.

Sarah didn't understand what he meant, but she saw the mischief brewing in her step-daughter's dark eyes.

"It's getting on for milking time," she said, "you'd best be calling home the cows."

Elvira moved to the door, but before she disappeared she caught John's eye, and smiled at him, showing strong white teeth.

"When's Jan coming home, Sarah?" John set the empty glass on the table.

Sarah stood up. "The old pump wasn't working this morning; will you help me, Master John, same as at the 'Plas'?"

Again John understood Sarah's evasive answer.

The kitchen had three doors—the pump was in the middle of the yard. No one could overhear a conversation there.

"I don't want Miss Jan here," announced Sarah, while John pumped. "It's not—it's not—the place for her."

"David Jones was her uncle before you married him," was John's reply.

"That's got nothing to do with it—take care, Master John—you're spilling it over—nor that Elvira is Miss Jan's cousin. She shan't come here—never."

John filled the second can. "Shall I ask the mater?" he said, leaning on the pump handle. "She'll have her sure enough."

"That's it, Master John."

"All right, Sarah—no, I'll carry them, both of them," but as he staggered back to the kitchen with the heavy cans John thought that poor old Sarah must be in a pretty sort of fix before she would try and drive Jan up to the house on the Parade.

As he walked home down the lane, he met Elvira driving home her cows.

"Hallo!" he hailed her.

"Good afternoon, Master John," she mocked him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

The girl opened her eyes wide in feigned astonishment.

"What do you mean?" she parried—every tone and gesture seeking to allure him.

"Say, Elvira—give me a kiss."

"Oh, Master John!" Her tone was a denial—her looks an invitation, and a moment later John put his arm round her and kissed her.

But, suddenly, he understood what Sarah meant, and seizing his handkerchief, scrubbed his mouth to try and cleanse it from taint.

When he reached home, he could feel a subtle change in the atmosphere even before a word was spoken. The strained look in his father's eyes was replaced by one of grudging admiration (John could only have told you there was a change—not what the change was). His mother kissed him loudly on the forehead in a way he peculiarly disliked. All through supper they talked brightly to one another, while John ate in abstracted silence without noticing that the meal was an extra good one. It was, as a matter of fact, part of Annie's thank-offering, for the mystery of John's whereabouts on the Sunday had been cleared up by that beneficent Providence who looks after fools. On this occasion He acted through the medium of Miss Blakeborough, and it had happened in this wise.

Adèle Blakeborough, a younger sister, became engaged to Mr. Hardacre, the Games Master at John's school. And when she wrote to her sister and announced the fact, the sister—that

is our Miss Blakeborough—sent her congratulations to her future brother-in-law, and asked casually was it the custom in boys' schools for pupils to be careering over the country at all hours of the day, even if they were such dear things as young John Owen, and so absurdly fond of little cousins as he was of Jan.

Hardacre took the letter to Doctor Jones, who pondered over it, and gave John the benefit of believing that his silence was due to gallant though mistaken motives, and in his letter to Mrs. Owen he signified his permission for John to return to school.

No wonder the Owens were relieved.

"I saw Sarah to-night." John raised his eyes from his plate, and caught the glances passing between his parents. "She wants us to have Jan for the holidays."

"We can't do that possibly." It was Henry who answered, and his tone was final as though the matter had been thought out before.

"We'll have to see about it." Annie nodded to John in a way that was intended to soothe him.

"Annie!" and her husband's tone was peremptory. "I do not often oppose you. But this time I am decided, so understand that Jan does not come here—once and for all."

John turned pale and pushed back his plate.

"Why not, Father?" he asked in a very small voice.

"I am not called upon to give you my reason," Henry fumed, "but this time I will. If my brother had wished us to have her, he would have said so. He deliberately chose otherwise; well and good. Secondly——"

"Henry," Annie implored him "Darling boy," she turned to John—"it was very sweet of you—but why not say where you had been?"

John shuddered with fear. It was coming, then—they were going to strip him of the reserve in which he had wrapped himself and make him bare himself to their eyes.

"It was foolish of you, John," Henry's voice broke in upon him. "You might have ruined your career for a whim."

But it is given to those who love best to mar the lives of those they would die to help, and it was Annie who sinned past forgiveness.

"Father and I quite understand about Jan, dear." Her son winced. "Your love for little Jan is very sweet, and we know how much you have helped to comfort her." She stopped because John looked as if he were going to faint.

"Hysteria," muttered Henry, riled at his son's drawn white face and staring eyes. "Then you go back to school to-morrow, do you hear?" He rose from the table, trying to pass off the matter with a high hand.

John did not move.

"It's all over now, darling," his mother assured him. "Doctor Jones understands, too."

"I'm not going back to school." The words forced themselves from John with a jerk.

Henry stopped at the door. "Nonsense," he said, briskly, "don't let me hear any more about it. Come round the garden, Annie?"

John did not move after they had gone. So they all knew. Once again they'd stormed the citadel of his soul. It wasn't exactly a secret, but it belonged to him—not to them. He left them alone—they persecuted him.

"Henry," Annie began, timidly.

"I'm not going to discuss John, my dear," said her husband. "He'll be all right when he gets back to school."

But when they went to call John the next morning, they found his bed empty and it had not been slept upon.

He had taken his life into his own hands, and he did not return to school.

## CHAPTER VIII

**I**T WAS within hailing distance of the end of the summer term, and the joy of girls as they looked forward to the holidays was as nothing to that of the Staff.

Teaching is the most fascinating and exacting profession under the sun. It absorbs all the energies, interest, brain, and patience of its followers. And boarding-schools naturally are the worst.

The sex problem plays a prominent part in the restlessness and discontent of every staff toward the end of a term. Men and women were meant to live and work together—presumably because each supplies the other's want.

In ordinary private life a house full of women is rather a pathetic object. Their attempts to adapt themselves to the second-best in life are palpably obvious, and they lavish unrequited affection upon cats and dogs and nephews—maiden aunts never really care for nieces.

And in an institution where thirty or more women live in close and intimate contact with one another for three months at a stretch the atmosphere grows electric.

Afternoon tea for the Staff was served on the

terrace, and Miss Blakeborough had just gone indoors wondering whether all dear, good women talked such appalling tosh as her staff.

Miss Rivers now—splendid with the children and a good scholar—was unutterably boring. She was an egoist through and through, she looked on life in general from a subjective point of view, and as surely as streams turn to the sea, all her conversation ended with herself. Miss Talbot was too nervous to say anything unless she could agree with the last speaker, and she had the most irritating habit of fiddling with her shoe when addressed. Miss Clark talked “shop,” spoke of “my children” and “my little flock,” and told rather pointless stories of their sayings and doings. Miss Saunders opposed everybody for the sake of contradicting—Miss Somers adored the Head with a blind, school-girl sort of devotion which the Head found wearing.

“Good Lord, what a cat I’m getting!”

Miss Blakeborough leant back in her chair, stretched herself and yawned, conscious with a pleasing little sense of superiority that she was rather a young and unorthodox Head Mistress.

Suddenly a piercing yell came from the end of the long corridor followed by another and yet another.

Miss Blakeborough sprang to her feet and hurried from the room.

There was a crowd of small girls buzzing round

some central object like a swarm of wasps. Their small faces were red with indignation and two of them had their arms round Mona McEvoy who was crying loudly.

Jan Owen stood in the middle of the crowd, her legs apart, her head thrown back.

"Serve her right," she was saying at the top of her voice, "and if any one else says so, I'll do it to her, too. So there."

"Children! What is the meaning of this noise, and Mona, what is the matter?"

There was dead silence for a moment at Miss Blakeborough's words. Then Mona dissolved into tears again. "Jan Owen hit me," she wailed.

"Jan!" Miss Blakeborough turned to the culprit, "is that so?"

"Well," said Jan, "not hit her; I banged her head against the wall."

"On purpose?" There are points in a dull end of term, after all.

"Yes," said Jan, "and if she says it again——"

"Jan!" Miss Blakeborough's tone cut short further threats. "Go straight upstairs, without speaking to any one, and go to bed and stay there."

Jan cast one vindictive look over her shoulder at the weeping Mona. "Booby," she ejaculated as she marched away, head in the air.

The bump on Mona's head testified to Jan's truth, but after the matron had bathed it with arnica and had administered two sweet biscuits by

way of a "pick-me-up," the patient felt sufficiently restored to return to the bosom of her Form, who were doing dictation with Miss Rivers.

It was a makeshift lesson; no lower-school mistress was free, so Miss Rivers, who couldn't abide "little ones," was pressed in to fill the gap, which she did unwillingly, because she thought it "a pretty good nerve of the Head to ask it!"

She took no trouble over it. First she read a paragraph, always from "Alice in Wonderland," next she re-read it, phrase by phrase, and the class wrote it down; then she made a fair copy on the board, and the children changed books and corrected each other's work. It was as dull as it could be, but Form II loved it far better than they did the efforts of Miss Clarke, who really did her very best.

Miss Blakeborough did not ask Mona for her version of the quarrel: if Jan were difficult she might be asked later, but the Headmistress had no doubts of Jan's willingness to answer.

Every girl in the school had a cubicle to herself, and when Miss Blakeborough knocked at Jan's door half an hour later there was no answer at first, though a low chuckle of laughter and Jan's voice could be heard from within.

"Jan," called Miss Blakeborough, the disciplinarian rising in her at this deliberate flouting of her authority, and opening the door she went in.

Jan sat up in bed in one of the dainty little night-

gowns Sarah's coarse fingers had made for her, while clasped in her arms was a battered wax-doll called Jan-John, which her father had given her years ago. Generations of dolls had come and gone since then, but none had rivalled Jan-John in her mistress's affections.

Jan looked up with the friendliest smile.

With the wonderful memory of a child she had forgotten the unfortunate fracas of half an hour ago. She held out her doll for approval.

"I've been smacking her," she gurgled; "she's very naughty."

Miss Blakeborough came right into the tiny room and for a moment was silent. She was an enthusiastic admirer of Kipling: she even liked "Stalky & Co.," which is a hard nut for the teaching profession. In her secret soul she fancied herself the female counterpart of "that downy bird—the Prooshian Bates," and followed his example in dealing with the unusual in an unusual way.

"What has she done?" she inquired, gravely.

"She's quarrelsome," said Jan, falling into the game delightedly, "she's a great trouble to me."

Miss Blakeborough sat down on the end of the little bed, and looked meaningfully at the child.

"And you are troublesome to me," she said at last, "but I can't slap you."

"Can't you?" Jan's eyes were wide with astonishment. "Sarah did—often."

"That was different. In a way you belonged to Sarah——"

"Yes," Jan interrupted, eagerly, "there was Daddy and Dio and Sarah and me. Now I don't belong to nobody." Her mouth drooped for an instant, then turned up into a delighted little smile, "But I shall belong to John," she said.

If Miss Blakeborough had followed her impulse, she would have taken the child into her arms and nursed her—Jan's smallness gave her such an unfair advantage. Even as it was, she swallowed and blinked and said in a husky voice:

"Why did you hit Mona?"

"Oh," said Jan, attending rather carefully to Jan-John's clothing which had become unfastened, "they were all talking of their mothers—and I said mine was the prettiest, and Mona said"—Jan paused, impressed—"that I hadn't got a mother, so I banged her head. I have, haven't I?"

"Yes." Miss Blakeborough made for the door, and stood well in the shadow. "Listen, Jan; you may get up in half an hour's time, when the bell rings, and come down to my room and tell Mona you are sorry you hurt her."

"All right," Jan answered, indifferently.

But Mona waited in the Head's room ten minutes and Jan did not appear, and the maid who was sent to fetch her came back smiling to tell

Miss Blakeborough that Miss Owen was fast asleep, hugging to her breast an ugly old doll.

Unless the Staff had combined to resist it, Jan Owen would have been badly spoiled by the elder girls.

Clare Goodyer, for instance, took her up in the hopes of hearing about John. Dick had written to her the sad news that John had disappeared from school in the middle of the term, and though he'd written, John hadn't answered.

"Is your cousin at home, Jan?" Clare asked her one day.

"I dunno," said Jan, licking from her fingers the remains of the toffee Clare had given her.

"He's not at school now."

"Isn't he?" champed Jan.

"Oh, shut up, child, don't suck so loudly!" cried Clare.

Jan stood up. "I like sucking loudly," and she gave an illustration, "but if you don't like it, I'll go away."

Clare reflected as Jan ran down the hill that "it was a fat lot of use pumping that kid," though Jan had received that very morning a letter from John with no address at the top:

DARLING JAN:

I've begun working for our house. I'll come and fetch you when I'm ready. Don't forget.

Bestest love from

JOHN.

He had written a letter at the same time to his mother:

DEAR MOTHER:

I couldn't ever explain to you and Father, and I couldn't take the chances you gave me. Now I'll make opportunities for myself. I am going to Canada and I'll send you my address.

Your affectionate son,

JOHN.

I've written to Willie Griffiths and told him so.

Annie read the letter aloud at the breakfast table.

"All right," said Henry, but he had aged ten years in the last few days—"he's made his bed, let him lie on it."

"It was very thoughtful of him to say that," said Annie, clutching at the last straw, and Henry understood.

Henceforward Brynavon talked of John as one of their promising young men who had "gone to Canada—farming they do say."

His parents did not speak much of their son; their disappointment was too bitter, and yet somewhere at the back of Henry's mind lurked that feeling of admiration for the lad which he could not stifle. John, at any rate, knew what he wanted and he'd gone ahead to get it. Thwarted hopes and bitter disappointments had strewn his path, but he'd thrust them aside.

"An impossible boy, oh, yes—but with the makings of a man in him—and a fine man, too."

Within a fortnight of the end of term Miss Clark discovered that it would stimulate the interest of her Form if she might take them to the Zoo one Saturday afternoon, so that they might see in real life the creatures whose habits they had learnt in Nature Study.

"Very well," said Miss Blakeborough. "I'll come along, too."

From the Thursday when it was settled till the Saturday when the excursion took place seemed to the imagination of Form II endless. Even the nights dragged and the days were slow, and on the eventful morning Form II was up on the first clang of the bell, and ready dressed long before breakfast hour.

What tongue can relate with due justice the joys of the walk to the station—the journey to London—then lunch in a real proper restaurant (special arrangement with Slaters), and best of all, the drive in the private 'bus across London to Regent's Park?

Miss Blakeborough loathed expeditions, but she supported her staff on principle, and really the children's excitement was rather sweet.

Once inside the Zoo, they were mad with pleasure.

"Let's see the bears first."

"No, the lions."

"I want to see the snake-house."

"We're quite near the bears," said Miss Blakeborough.

"Let's see the bears first," they chorused, and started off at a run in that direction.

Delighted squeals were borne back to Miss Blakeborough and Miss Clark, and when they arrived, Form II were scurrying up and down the barrier before the bear-houses, watching while the creatures tramped to and fro across the cages or poked their paws under the bars—like beggars asking alms.

"Isn't he lovely?" cried Mona McEvoy. "Look at him."

Her friends joined in high peals of laughter, but Miss Blakeborough caught sight of Jan—her whole body rigid—her face tense and white.

Leaving the others to Miss Clark, the Head led Jan away.

"What's the matter, Jan?" she asked.

"Have they all got bars?" said Jan. "Can't they never be free?"

Miss Blakeborough thought she was afraid.

"No, they can't get out, because if they did, it would be pretty bad for you and me. But they can't—don't be afraid."

"They're caged," wailed Jan. "Oh, I hate it—they want to be free."

"Come and see the old elephant," coaxed Miss Blakeborough.

"No, thank you," said Jan, the tears streaming down her face. "Oh, I do wish they would let them be free."

"Thank goodness for the usual placid children," thought the Head, but she was very fair-minded and respected everyone's point of view.

"I know," she said aloud, "let's go and have a glass of lemonade."

"No, thank you," Jan said again. "I've got a prickly throat. It's too big to swallow, you know."

In a secluded corner under the trees Miss Blakeborough looked at Jan's throat. It was very red and swollen, with here and there an ugly little ulcer beginning to show.

Miss Clark declared she could manage the rest of the expedition quite easily. She was rather glad to be left and showed it. She and Miss Blakeborough were like parallel lines—they would work together, but never meet.

The Head took Jan back and isolated her for a couple of days. Then, on the doctor's advice, she wrote round to all the parents, and the school broke up ten days earlier, because it was still a moot point whether Jan had or had not scarlet fever.

Then she began to peel, and that settled the matter. Incidentally, it settled Sarah's hash. She had been so determined that Jan should not come to Pentre Fawr. Now Jan could not go there nor

anywhere else. Sarah packed up at once and came to nurse her. Aunt Annie wrote nearly every day "just a little note"—about nothing at all—"and Uncle Henry sends his love."

Miss Blakeborough stayed on after the others. The Swiss holiday wasn't due till the 29th of July, and she wanted to be near at hand till Jan was really better. She went in to see the child every day. Jan had had the disease so slightly, there was no need for the Head to fear to leave her.

Jan unbent as soon as she felt better and talked of home, and John, and the old school. She spoke of her father constantly, and told Sarah and Miss Blakeborough that she was going to keep house for John in the "Plas" when he was a man.

At night, after Jan was asleep, Sarah would change her dress, and come out into the garden and have a chat with Miss Blakeborough.

"He left me 'sole guardian,' ma'am," she said one night. "It's a lot to put on a woman."

"He must have meant it as a great honour to you. But it will mean a tremendous lot of work for you. Jan does manage to keep people busy."

"She does that, ma'am, she always did. I had her from the first month."

"Then she's almost like your own." Miss Blakeborough knew she had made a mistake, but didn't know where, for Sarah stiffened and said: "No, not like my own."

"No, of course not," agreed Miss Blakeborough,

but how could she know that it hurt Sarah to have Jan compared to great hulking Harold—that son of hers—who lounged about the farm—a little wanting, amiable, but foolish.

“Have you been married long?” Miss Blakeborough hated making a mistake, so she turned the conversation to a topic on which Sarah, the married woman, would shine in comparison with the spinster schoolmarm.

“Six weeks—it’s more like six years sometimes,” was the reply.

“You mean you’ve settled down so quickly?”

Sarah gazed straight ahead of her and nodded. Her hands were folded in front of her, the wedding-ring, as usual, in prominence.

“Yes,” she said at last, “settled down, that’s it. But it was very nice when I was free.”

It was such an unusual view of marriage that Miss Blakeborough forbore comment.

“I think I can leave you both safely now, can’t I?” she said, presently. “I’ll come over to-morrow and say good-bye to Jan, then I’ll disinfect myself and go off on Wednesday.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ve arranged all about having the Sanatorium disinfected, and the doctor will notify the authorities.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“No, ma’am, thank you.”

"Good-night, then, Mrs. Jones."

"Good-night, ma'am."

The next morning Miss Blakeborough went across to say good-bye to Jan.

The child was out of bed sitting wrapped in a rug in a big armchair. She seemed very small and frail. The delectable Jan-John was in her arms, and she looked up with a very engaging smile.

"Hallo, Jan. What! Out of bed? You are getting on famously, aren't you?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Blakeborough."

"And soon you'll be able to go into the garden with Mrs. Jones!"

"You mean Sarah—oh, yes!"

"I don't think you'll be dull, will you?"

"Oh, no, thank you." Jan's manner was almost effusive, "not a bit dull with Sarah, me, and you."

Her family privatim and seriatim thought her mad, and were justifiably vexed at the telegram, but the fact remains that Miss Blakeborough did not go to Switzerland for her holiday.

## CHAPTER IX

JAN sat on her bed and looked at the chaos of clothes around her.

"Hadn't you better begin, Jan?" Mona McEvoy suggested.

"Why?" asked Jan, without moving.

"To finish—it's a good enough reason for most people." Mona's tone was severe, but her eyes looked at her friend kindly enough.

It was the last night of the summer term and Jan was leaving. She was seventeen years old now, with a tall, straight figure like a boy's and a thin, piquant face. She wasn't in the least pretty—only unusual, an effect which was heightened by her straight black hair, cut square on her neck in Florentine fashion, before "bobbing" became the craze.

Mona was large and angular, more than a match for Jan now in any head-knocking competition.

"I'm awfully sorry you're leaving, old thing," she said at last.

"I don't know," answered Jan, "one's got to leave some time. I want to get up to Girton next year. Are you going?"

Mona nodded. "But it seems an awful pity to drop a year like this—you'll lose ground."

"Oh, I don't know." It was Jan's favourite expression to-night. "You see—it's always easier, if there's no choice."

"How do you mean?"

Jan's worst enemy, and she had several, couldn't have called her expansive, but she tried to explain. "It's in the Will. When I left school—before I decided what to do—I was to go for a year to my relations. So you see it's settled. I'll work at home all right."

Jan's reticence had made her something of a mystery. "What relations are they?" Mona asked.

"I don't know," Jan answered, carelessly, springing up from the bed. "Here, chuck me over my boots, there's a good soul."

Mona thought Jan was evading her question, but it was the truth that Jan did not know to whom she was going—to Sarah at Pentre Fawr or to Aunt Annie at the Parade.

No one else knew, either. Miss Blakeborough didn't; she had told Jan of the clause in the Will. "But I don't know who your relations are," she had said. Sarah didn't know, either, as her letter to Jan had showed. Aunt Annie had written two sheets all about how pleased she would be to see Jan, and how it had always been hers and Uncle Henry's wish to do their duty by Jan, as dear

Jan knew—only the peculiar circumstances of the Will—

The letter had rambled on, and Jan skipped freely. But a sentence at the end caught her eye: "I heard from John last week—he talks of coming home. And we shall all be pleased to see you," she finished.

At first Jan thought the "you" was a mistake for "him," but later she concluded that Aunt Annie was the only person who had no doubts as to the term "relations"; in her mind, at any rate, Sarah as a relation did not exist.

"My dear," expostulated Mona, "you're so slow, I shan't ever get my own packing done."

"I believe if you went I'd be quicker."

"Thank you, Jan Owen," said Mona, "I'm sorry to have hindered you," and she departed, slamming the door.

Jan packed slowly—she was thinking hard. She had not been to Brynavon since she came to school seven years ago. She supposed it had happened like that; she did not guess at Sarah's patient scheming to keep her away.

That first summer holiday, when Miss Blakeborough had stayed at home from Switzerland, had had great results in the lives of all concerned.

To begin with, she had earned Sarah's devotion—a thing rarely given, and afterward never withdrawn. And one stifling August evening, as they paced the terrace side by side, Sarah had told the

other woman the secret which was weighing her down.

"I can't have Miss Jan home," she finished, "until as I've had time to get him in hand. Drinks, he does—something shocking."

About Elvira she was more reticent. "Not what you'd call a nice young girl, ma'am—not fit for Miss Jan. I'm thankful Master John isn't home, that I am."

For once Miss Blakeborough was at a loss, and suddenly she felt rather passée and out of things. All her life she'd dealt with things on the surface—little questions of discipline—small points of conduct; this woman was up against life in all its ugliness, and Miss Blakeborough did not dare to desecrate the confidence by words of conventional sympathy. To those in trouble the curiosity of others is not an impertinence; it betrays interest.

"What about Mrs. Owen?" the Head asked.

Sarah sniffed contemptuously:

"I don't rightly understand, ma'am—but somehow it's Mr. Owen as won't 'ave Miss Jan to the 'ouse—his own brother's child, too, and Master John the very spit of the master, and no more like his pa than what you are."

"There's no use spoiling the ship for a hap-porth of tar," Miss Blakeborough said to herself a month later when Jan was fit to travel; so she took rooms at a small seaside village and Jan paddled and built castles, and ate and slept and grew

less like a little shadow and more like a child of ten.

It was no holiday for Sarah who was working with an object in view. "I'm busy," she'd say when Jan brought her bits of seaweed and other treasures; "show them to Miss Blakeborough."

So Jan would patter off to the Head, until that became the natural thing to do, and then, having accomplished her object, Sarah packed up her boxes and went home.

Miss Blakeborough enjoyed herself more than ever before. Jan took her so much for granted. She ran to her to be pinned up—she asked her for pennies for sweets (Sarah had left Jan a shilling and Jan gave it to Miss Blakeborough to keep and asked for a penny every day), and when some old gentleman asked Jan whose little girl she was, Jan nodded to the Head sitting on the stones.

It had been the same time and again. About the end of every term Sarah had written and asked Miss Blakeborough if she could kindly suggest any plans for Miss Jan, and it usually ended by Jan's spending her holidays with the Head. Sometimes Sarah came up and took Jan away for a while, sometimes she came to the Blakeboroughs, too, and mended and made new clothes for Jan; but it was Miss Blakeborough to whom Jan looked as the ruler of her destiny.

Miss Blakeborough had solved the question of discipline, too, and the child played up. In the

holidays they both forgot school—in term-time holidays were things of the past or dreams of the future.

It had to be like that, because Jan was a confirmed law-breaker, and except that her circumstances were peculiar, she would have been sent away long ago, with a note to the effect that she would probably do better elsewhere. But as there was nowhere to send her, she stayed on, broke the rules, and took the punishment with an acquiescence that drove her teachers nearly mad.

"I called the tune," her attitude seemed to say, "now I'll pay the piper if you like."

As she grew older, she became quieter but no less troublesome, and her popularity with the girls began to wane. She was too moody for others to trouble to understand her; at times she would be riotous and then suddenly, for no reason at all, when the fun was at its height, Jan would get pensive and silent, till like a ghost at a feast she chilled the gaiety of the others. She was a wide reader, and the people around her were of small importance in her eyes. She peopled a world with creatures of her own imagination, and though she never quarrelled now with other girls, she did a worse thing than that: she forgot their existence.

And yet they did like her—she was too utterly indifferent to them to be popular, but as a riddle of which they could not guess the answer, she appealed to them.

The Staff, with the exception of Miss Blakeborough, disliked her in various degrees. She hadn't that inordinate affection for any member which schoolgirls usually have for one or other of their mistresses. She didn't like games—she hated getting hot and was sorry for the loser. She had no Form spirit—no competitive instinct. In a word, she was difficult—as each Form Mistress found to her cost. On the other hand, she had charming manners—"affected," Miss Rivers said. "Better affected than none," laughed Miss Clark not in praise of Jan, but as a hit at Miss Rivers whose lack of manners was conspicuous. Jan was sometimes quite concerned to hear about the rule she had broken, but as she was always willing to express contrition at her lapse, and invariably did the same next time, she was considered insincere.

But she was really quite distressed at the trouble she gave, only the trouble it caused her to keep the rules irked her more. Hence she chose the lesser evil.

One sultry July afternoon Jan sat alone in the deserted schoolroom preparing a passage of Cæsar which she had failed to bring to class that morning. Now, if there was one thing on which Miss Rivers prided herself, it was her discipline.

"His rebus actis." Jan, begin to construe, please."

Jan's desk was in a patch of sunlight, and she

was basking with animal contentment in the light and warmth. At her name she started, and Mona McEvoy showed her the place.

Miss Rivers kept her temper with difficulty; she liked bright, smart, eager girls—not this lackadaisical nonchalance.

“‘His rebus actis’—When this had been done,” began Jan who had met this opening before—“Cæsar——” she looked ahead for the verb—past a “cum” clause and an ablative absolute. Ah! there it was at last. “Profectus est?” she said, with a note of inquiry in her voice.

Miss Rivers looked at her in silence. Jan was one of her failures, and the fact never ceased to rile her.

“Haven’t you prepared?” she asked at last in an awful voice.

Mona shifted about in an agony of nervousness for her friend.

“I’m afraid I didn’t,” was Jan’s answer.

“Why not?” demanded Miss Rivers.

“I forgot it.”

“Nonsense, Jan, you couldn’t ‘forget’ a preparation.”

Jan flushed a dull, brick red. “I forgot it,” she repeated, slowly, and with emphasis, her eyes fixed on the mistress.

Miss Rivers bit her lip—a tussle with Jan would mean that the girl would lose her temper and that, in its turn, would mean reporting the matter to

the Head. And though Miss Rivers admired the Head's capability, she disliked any interference with her Form, especially as to Jan.

"Very well," she said, icily; "stay in this afternoon and bring me the work, and as much again at four o'clock. Next girl."

Jan's plea of forgetfulness was quite true. She had gone to the library the afternoon before to confirm a quotation for an English essay, and had stumbled across Browning's "Saul," in a volume of selections. She hadn't understood a tenth of it, but she had read on and on, rapt and enthralled, forgetful of everything till the clang of the tea-bell forced itself upon her. She had been late for tea, which hadn't made for pleasantness, but it had been worth it. And she had lain awake far into the night; the poem wouldn't leave her, and now while the rest of the class stumbled through a tedious description of how Cæsar built his bridge, Jan gazed at the Latin words which had no meaning for her, while her mind—worlds away—kept repeating:

. . . . Behold! I could love if I durst!  
But I sink the pretension as fearing a man may o'ertake  
God's own speed in the one way of love: I abstain for love's  
sake.

"Principal parts of dimitto—Jan."

And God is seen God.  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the elod.

Jan gazed at Miss Rivers' short, thick-set figure, at the keen, alert face, and hard, bright eyes. "Is God there, too?" she wondered.

"Why, Jan, you're not even attending to the lesson. And you have come totally unprepared. What is the use of my wasting my time and the time of the class," etc., etc.

Jan had heard it all so very many times before that she could have carried on the discourse.

But all the same, that day marked the dawn of a new era in her life, and it was Miss Rivers who pointed the way.

Jan appeared on the stroke of four, with a translation of the Latin written out, and all the principal parts of the verbs learnt.

"Why not do it to time?" suggested Miss Rivers, giving Jan an opening for some explanation or apology.

But like flowers which cannot open except in the sunlight, Jan was silent.

Miss Rivers' voice was colder. "You are getting up in the school—you are in the Fifth Form, and you have no idea of discipline—you make no effort at keeping rules."

It was too true to be disputed. "There are so many of them," Jan remarked in passing.

"You don't like rules," continued Miss Rivers—"neither does any one else."

Jan had not thought of that before, and gave the elder woman more of her attention. She had

been too much inclined to feel that the world consisted of Jan—and others—only the others were inconsiderable.

“The wise people are those who live without constantly knocking up against rules, like you do. The rule remains—it’s you who get hurt. And there is such a thing as freedom within the law. Now go into the garden. Take your books away—don’t leave them here.”

Jan ran downstairs, flung her books into her locker, and passed out into the garden.

There was the semi-final of the Form Tennis Match being played on the far court, which was lined with partisans of the two Forms, cheering and encouraging the players. Jan looked across, and decided against it, and then slipped round the five courts and up the hill, and flung herself down on the grass.

“Freedom within the law,” Miss Rivers had said. Well, it was worth considering. Any sort of freedom was.

“Hallo, Jan! Dreaming, as usual. Isn’t that exactly like you—not even to remember your friends.”

Clare Goodyer, who had left a year ago, looked down at Jan with a superior smile.

Jan sprang up. “Don’t be a silly ass, Clare,” she advised, then stopped. A young man by Clare’s side was smiling broadly at her.

“She’s always like that,” Clare said, turning to

him. "Jan, my brother Dick—he was at school with your cousin John."

"Oh, were you?" It was obvious that Dick rose in her eyes. "You know he went to Canada."

"No! What's he doing there?"

"There was some fuss or other—I don't know what"—Dick flicked an imaginary speck from his coat, so that his face was partly hidden—"and John couldn't stand it—so he just went away. And then he met men going to Canada; three of them—the fourth had dropped out at the last minute, and John persuaded them to take him along. He went over steerage, poor boy, and he's been there ever since."

"Do you hear from him?" Clare asked.

Jan opened her eyes wide. "Of course," she said.

"Where did you say he was?"

Jan hadn't said, but she gave the name now.

Clare turned to her brother:

"You must remember that," she said. "You ought to write to him again."

And John's mail brought him two letters—Jan's little note, and a four-page effusion of flourishes from someone who signed herself Clare Goodyer.

"May I come in?"

Jan sprang to the door, and Miss Blakeborough walked into the room. The years which had swept

away Jan's childhood had left their traces on her, too. She brushed her hair very carefully now to hide a gray patch at one side, and she wore high collars to her shirts and smart bows. She told herself it was more trim and business-like, but her glass told her with ruthless veracity that her neck was beginning to show her age and was best covered.

"My dear—what chaos—I thought you'd have finished."

"So did I—only I began to think instead—"

"And that's always fatal for you, isn't it? Pass me those shoes."

"No, no," protested Jan, "I'll do it."

"Don't be silly," advised the Head. "I want to talk to you this evening, and you must pack first. Now those nightdresses."

Miss Blakeborough packed quickly. It's impossible to do much for any one without growing to love them, and the Head didn't trust herself to think what Jan's leaving was going to mean to her.

"There," she said at last, "that's done. Now let's go to the garden."

They paced the terrace side by side.

"Really, Miss Blakeborough does spoil that Owen girl," remarked Miss Rivers from the Staff Room.

"Well!" argued Miss Clark, "it's rather different for Jan, isn't it?"

"That's the mistake you've all made—different, and the girl now really does think she is separate from other people."

"Not a bit," said Miss Clark, bluntly. "She's queer, and the Head has the good sense to see it and not force a round peg in a square hole. That's all."

"Well, I'm very glad she's going," said Miss Rivers with an air of finality.

"You know she's done quite well for me," Miss Talbot pleaded, "her essay last week on 'Farm Life In Canada' was really good."

"Then she'd some reason of her own for doing it!" retorted Miss Rivers.

Outside, Miss Blakeborough and Jan were talking.

"Are you glad to be going, Jan?"

"I don't know, Miss Blakeborough. I'm sorry to leave you, of course, but I want to get on."

"How do you mean?"

Jan wrinkled her nose in the effort to explain.

"I don't quite know. But I feel like a dog that's on the scent; he follows it until he gets there. Oh, I don't know."

"You must keep up your reading if you mean to go to Girton."

"Yes—I hope I'll have time for that. I don't know yet where to go."

"I had a letter from your aunt," began Miss Blakeborough.

"So did I," said Jan. "John's coming home. But, of course, I think Sarah is a relation. I wonder what Daddy meant. I've forgotten a lot about him—at least—it's kind of faded, but I do remember that he never made things easy for people."

"Sarah's very wonderful," said Miss Blakeborough.

"Why?" asked Jan.

"That's rather a stupid question for a person who isn't usually stupid. Sarah had you when she wasn't much older than you are now—and she brought you up really well until you came here."

"Yes," Jan agreed, "but she liked me."

"Of course—that's part of being splendid—liking what you do. And then she married—"

"My uncle," Jan supplied, "and never had me home since!"

"A drunkard," said Miss Blakeborough, "and was too anxious for you to let you come near him. You may stare at me, Jan, but it's the truth. She told me just a little tiny bit about things years ago when you had scarlet fever. That is why I've always had you. Sarah was putting up such a fine fight for you that I had to help, too."

Jan digested this for some time. "I do hope I'll turn out worth it," she remarked at last.

Thanks would have been inadequate, but it was characteristic of Jan not to attempt them. Miss Blakeborough laughed.

"You'll be all right, dear," she reassured her, "and you've given me a lovely time, too."

"And Sarah?" Jan inquired, anxiously.

"Sarah's had a bad time, but I gather she's won."

"Why?"

"In the first place, she evidently wants you to go to her now, and so she thinks it fit for you, and that must mean she has her husband well in hand. In the second place, the farm is doing well—so the husband can't be drinking away his money."

"Poor old Sarah," said Jan, softly.

They dropped into silence, but Jan's face was working as if she were trying to say something.

At last she slipped a hand into the Head's, in one of her rare caresses.

"It looks like a muddle at present," she said, waving her hand to indicate her future, "but it's sure to straighten out, and anyhow I'm going home, and John's going to be there."

Miss Blakeborough felt something cold clutch at her heart—it was not fear, it was certainty. From henceforth she knew her place in Jan's scheme of life.

She was relegated to the "has beens."

## CHAPTER X

**P**UT the best sheets on the spare-room bed, Emily, and—— No, put the best sheets on Mr. John's bed—no, Emily, put one of the best sheets on each bed—top sheet, and you'll find pillow-shams in the bottom drawer. That will do."

Emily listened attentively, with her mouth open and her cap slightly askew, but Mrs. Owen's attempt to be fair both to John and Jan confused her, and she left the best linen sheets in the cupboard, and no one had them.

Annie bustled away to the kitchen. "I'll run downtown and get Mr. Thomas to spare me a nice shoulder of lamb, Alice," she cooed. "And now what about pudding? They'll be hungry, that is if they really do come to-day, only Mr. John is so irregular—you never know."

"Rice, mum?" said Alice. She was a girl from a farm six miles away, and she walked to and fro on her Sundays out. But her mind could not grasp more than one fact at a time; rice was the only suggestion in puddings she had ever been known to make.

"That will do nicely," agreed Mrs. Owen, "very

nicely: I want them to have a nice dinner. Now what about lunch?"

The transformation of dinner into lunch and supper into dinner marked the biggest step forward that the Owens had taken in the last seven years—that and Mr. Owen's acceptance of the mayoralty last year.

People who wanted to be playful spoke of Annie as the Lady Mayoress, and Annie shook her head vigorously and protested: "No, no. My husband is not quite Lord Mayor yet."

Henry was deservedly popular in the town. He was a safe man, with an air of breeding about him, and he upheld the dignity of his office. He was silent, and a good listener, too. The wonder was that he had not gone further. Annie admired him immensely, and nursed in secret the wild ambition of a knighthood for him. Once she mentioned it to Henry, but he was very angry.

"Do you want to make me ridiculous?" he demanded, blinking behind his glasses.

She was sorely puzzled at his answer: she was sure he must have misunderstood her—he couldn't have heard what she had said, but he had looked so vexed she had not cared to explain.

"Sir Henry and Lady Owen." She never said the dear, dreadful words aloud—it seemed like tempting Providence—only—only—well, there, if ever such a thing did come along—and, of course, one never knew——

And by way of preparation—though the reasoning is not easy to follow—Annie began to rest for an hour in the afternoons.

“I’m coming downtown with you this morning, Henry,” his wife announced when she met him in the hall after breakfast. “Can you wait, dear?”

“Certainly, I’ll take a walk round the garden.”

There was nothing to be noted on Henry’s face, though his soul was stirred within him at the prospect of seeing John after seven years. John a man now—but what kind of man? Henry could see more clearly than Annie that John’s return would not bring unmixed happiness to the home.

After seven years’ freedom from the parental roof—seven years in which the boy had passed into manhood—would he slip back again into his place or into any place? Perhaps he had only come over for a holiday—but if he’d come to stay, what work was he going to do? And then, suddenly, all these questions and perplexities were swept away by a great engulfing wave of gladness, that anyhow he *was* going to see the boy.

“I thought I’d better see Mr. Thomas myself,” chattered Annie, as she pattered along beside him; “he’ll give me a nice leg of lamb, or did I say shoulder? Now, wouldn’t it be a funny thing if they travelled together!”

“Very,” answered Henry, though without mirth. Then, suddenly, “They—who are they?”

"Jan and John, dear!" Annie's tone was one of patient surprise.

Henry stopped short in the middle of the path.

"Is Jan coming to-day?"

"Henry, dear—of course she is; Emily has put the spare-room all ready, and——"

Henry was too considerate a husband to relish his task, but he went straight to the point. "She won't come to us, my dear," he said, gently. "My brother spoke of relations, I know. But Sarah is guardian and relation now."

"But, Henry," she began, angrily, then smiled and bowed. "Good morning, Mrs. Griffiths, how are you to-day?"

"Nicely, thank you."

"Henry," as they moved on, "Jan couldn't go and live in Pentre Fawr. It wouldn't be respectable."

"David Jones signed the pledge two years ago. He's kept it, too, as far as I know," her husband reminded her.

"Then I shall speak to Sarah!" announced Mrs. Owen, stormily.

"That won't help matters, Annie; Sarah's the guardian, and she'll put the matter to Jan. It will be for Jan to decide."

"I never heard of such a thing, never! When we are willing, too! Tch, tch, tch! What will people say? There is Sarah! Good-bye, Henry. Lunch at one as usual," and Mrs. Owen darted

across the road and followed Sarah into the butcher's shop.

The assistant was serving Sarah. Mr. Thomas—the great man himself—hurried forward to attend to the wants of the Mayor's wife.

"A nice shoulder of lamb, Mr. Thomas—a good-sized piece. My young people will be hungry."

Mr. Thomas was rather deaf, and Annie's staccato words carried across to Sarah who was buying a piece of scrag.

"I knew she didn't expect her," thought the Mayor's wife, "she'd never offer the girl scrag-end surely—not the first night. Oh, good morning, Sarah," she went on out loud.

The Christian name as Mrs. Owen applied it was a mark of servitude—the term a mistress would use in speaking to her maid. Sarah was Mrs. Jones now—mistress of Pentre Fawr, wife of a sober husband. She hadn't worked late and early, body and soul, for seven years, to be treated with condescension before shopkeepers. A wiser woman than Mrs. Owen would have known this instinctively, or not knowing, would have learnt it from Sarah's grave face.

"Good morning, Mrs. Owen," Sarah answered. The tone was that of an equal—her look was a challenge.

"Now," pursued Mrs. Owen, rushing onward to destruction, "won't you come up this after-

noon and have a cup of tea with us? Miss Jan will be so pleased to see you."

Their purchases over, the two women left the shop. Sarah's scrag was in her basket and Mr. Thomas was going to send the shoulder to the Parade.

Sarah moved a step or two so that the assistant should not hear.

"I'm Miss Jan's guardian," she said, slowly, allowing each word to sink in, "and I have the right to have her. But I intend that she shall go to Mr. Griffiths who made out the master's Will, and there before him—before you, if you like—she shall choose. I wish you good morning, Mrs. Owen."

"Never have I been so insulted in all my life, dear," Annie told her husband at lunch—"to speak to me like that, in the open street. 'I have the right—I intend.' What is the world coming to, I should like to know?"

"The idea isn't a bad one," said Henry, dispassionately—"you both want her—God only knows why—let her choose."

Later in the afternoon Annie discovered Emily's mistake about the sheets, but she let it be and that shows how much upset she was.

Meanwhile, the express tearing its way through wonderful English country was carrying Jan nearer and nearer her home. Her carriage was stuffy, and she was hot and strangely depressed. The woman opposite was feeding her baby at the breast, and her husband refreshed himself peri-

odically by drinking from a mysterious bottle he concealed on his person. The child of five had been eating steadily since they left Paddington and was now chewing toffee at the top of its voice, so to speak. The only other occupant, an elderly gentleman, was leaning back in the corner with a handkerchief over his face, snoring loudly.

"Second lunch," called the attendant, "any one for second lunch?"

Jan stood up, and slowly made her way along the corridor to the luncheon car, but the stream of those who had lunched coming from the opposite direction hindered her and she arrived late. There was no seat vacant so far as she could see, until a waiter asking "One, Miss?" led her to a table for two at which sat a man whose face was hidden behind a newspaper.

As Jan took her seat he lowered the sheet, and looked at her.

"Jan," he said, suddenly.

"John!" She shot the name out at him, and then bit her lip and sat blinking furiously for a minute or two.

"Lord! Jan, you haven't altered a bit. I'd have known you anywhere!" John spoke slowly to give her time. "But it is queer meeting you like this. Seven years—I'm a man—you're still only a little girl, my child."

"I wonder if I could jump the stream now," laughed Jan, but her lips were trembling.

"Do you remember what happened last time you tried?" he teased.

"Yes," Jan flashed, "you called me a sport."

Their eyes met—each searching the other's.

"I must go and look at the stream." Jan spoke breathlessly.

"We'll go first thing to-morrow," John agreed, gravely.

"Are you going back to Canada?" Jan crumbled her bread restlessly.

"I don't think so—not at present. You see, Jan, it's a secret so far—but I've been doing pretty well—at least—all right—in some work." John had never overcome his difficulty in speaking about himself. "The point is—I've been writing—I called myself Owen John."

"You didn't!" Jan's incredulity was not flattering.

John nodded. "Don't talk about it at home, please—not till I've told them."

"I could have swanked ever so much if you only told me. But Owen John is awfully good. Are you sure it's you, John?"

"What have you been doing?" John demanded with a short laugh.

Jan considered the question before answering. "Growing up, I think, mostly. I haven't been home since—since—since I left."

"But why ever not—you didn't stay on at that old school, holidays and all, surely?"

Jan's reply was incoherent, Miss Blakeborough, Sarah, and David Jones being inextricably mixed. "Of course Sarah wanted me, though I didn't know it at the time, but Miss Blakeborough told me—only you see there was David Jones and Sarah hadn't him in hand as she has now. Sarah's splendid."

"But you could have gone to my people," John's tone was short and dry and his eyes grew suddenly hard.

"I generally stayed with Miss Blakeborough," was Jan's reply. "Now, you tell me about Canada."

While he spoke, Jan watched him. He was very like her father as she remembered him—tall and broad; his face was that of a man who had lived in the open air. He had her father's blue eyes and half-humorous smile—the same warm hand and long, slender fingers.

"I'd better move to your carriage," said John after the meal. "You can't come to mine."

"We're stuffy and full of crumbs," said Jan.

"Mine's a smoker," said John. "Let's go to the guard's van."

They perched themselves side by side on some luggage—half-a-crown usually melts the heart of a guard—and chattered away, heads together as if the seven years had been seven days, and they were still children back in the "Plas" garden.

"Oh, there are some photos perhaps you'd like

to see," said John, pulling out his notebook. "There's the house—and there's me—and here are Morrison, Saunders, and Sawyer, the three best pals any man ever had—bar one," he finished, his eyes on Jan. She was close beside him, her head bent over the photographs. He noted that she had the art of travelling tidily. Her serge costume was uncreased, her white shirt still fresh and clean.

"Do you mean me?" Jan faced him calmly.

John nodded. "Who else?" he laughed. A letter fluttered from his case on to the floor. The writing was large and sprawling and Jan recognized it.

"Oh!" she said, nodding toward the letter, "I thought you might mean Clare Goodyer."

John's memory took him back to that Sunday afternoon on the terrace with Jan tugging at his hand, and asking whether in the little house he was to build there was room for that Clare-girl.

"Jan!" he said, laying his hand on hers, "you haven't grown up a bit. You're a most shocking little duffer still!"

"Duffer yourself!" blazed Jan, drawing her hand away as the train steamed into Brynavon.

Sarah and Mrs. Owen had arrived at the station simultaneously quite twenty minutes too soon and the train was half an hour late. It was exceedingly awkward to walk to and fro meeting one another at every turn and trying to pretend that

each hadn't seen the other. "But that woman deserves a lesson," as Mrs. Owen had said to her husband, and Sarah's thoughts were too much occupied with the future to trouble about the "cut."

"My dearest boy," piped Annie when John alighted, "and where is Jan?"

But Jan was disentangling herself from Sarah's tearful embrace. At the sight of the girl all Sarah's composure had left her.

"My lamb, my lamb!" she sobbed. "Fancy to see you back again. Miss Jan fach! how you've grown."

Jan squeezed Sarah's hand tight; somehow it was the least and the very most she could do.

"It's lovely to see you, Sarah, dear," she whispered.

"Fancy making a scene like that before people," said Mrs. Owen, with her lips pursed up in disapproval. "Really!" Then hurrying forward, "Jan dear, tch, tch, tch—such a long time since I've seen you. Welcome home, dear!"

The words dried Sarah's tears effectively.

"Hallo, Sarah!" cried John, but Sarah didn't resent her name this time—"how's yourself? Here's an upset for Brynavon. Mother, why didn't the Mayor and Corporation turn out to meet us?"

"Oh, John, dear, you couldn't really expect that," and nothing his mother could have said

would have convinced John more firmly that the seven years hadn't altered her essentially. She had changed outwardly, but intrinsically she was the same.

Outside the station a car was waiting for Mrs. Owen, and David Jones stood by a trap.

"Come with me, Jan, dear." Mrs. Owen linked her arm through that of her niece. "We've got to call at the office—some absurd business or other."

John walked behind with Sarah, and grasped the situation at a glance. Sarah's face, which she thought was so sphinx-like, was an open book to him.

"Jan," he said, as she stood irresolute by the car, "do you mind going with Sarah?"

"John!" began his mother.

"I want to have my mother to myself," he concluded.

Inside the car Annie wept—John was too sweet, but to have upset all her plans like that—it was most vexing!

Sarah explained the situation to Jan. "It's for you to decide, Miss Jan," she kept saying—"I don't want to persuade you. 'Relations,' said the master. Now, what did he mean, do you think?"

At the office, Mr. Griffiths could throw no light on the subject, and Henry, having shaken hands with Jan—John kissed him—stood glum and

silent. The room was arranged with chairs placed as for a debate, Jan thought. In the centre was a table at which Mr. Griffiths sat with a chair for Jan beside him. On his right were Mrs. Owen and John, who suddenly wanted to shout out loud; on his left David Jones, twisting his hat in his hands, and Sarah.

Henry Owen stood by the window, acting as audience to the scene.

"You know the—er—situation, I believe, Miss Owen?" said the solicitor, looking at Jan over his spectacles.

"Most peculiar hat," thought Jan's aunt; "not altogether, perhaps, quite my taste—but still——"

"Your guardian," continued the old man, "has told me that you are to decide the meaning of your father's use of the word relations. On the one hand, there are obviously your respected uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Owen——"

He bowed to Annie, who acknowledged it with a graceful inclination of the head.

"Pompous old fool," thought Henry, suddenly irritable.

"Two to one that the pater explodes before the end," mused John.

"On the other," continued Mr. Griffiths, "there are your uncle—your mother's brother—Mr. David Jones, and his wife, your guardian."

Sarah gazed straight in front of her. Her heart was beating like an engine—her eyes were burning

and her throat was parched and dry. Her husband turned a dull brick red at the unusual attention paid to him, and so far forgot himself as to spit on the floor.

Jan looked from one to the other with a quick, bird-like glance. Sarah wanted her because Sarah loved her—that thrilled Jan. Aunt Annie wanted her because—well, it would look so queer, you know, for Jan to stay up at the farm, and Henry Mayor and all that! But John would be at the house on the Parade!

“You are free to choose, Miss Owen,” Mr. Griffiths reminded her.

Free! It was a silly travesty of the word. If she were really free, she wouldn’t go to either, and whichever way she chose, it would offend someone.

Suddenly Jan stood up and clasped the edge of the table. Not in vain had she been president of the School Debating Society.

“Gad!” murmured John.

“Mr. Griffiths,” said Jan, the colour rising to her cheeks, “Uncle Henry, Aunt Annie, Sarah dear”—she paused—“Uncle David, and John——”

John slapped his knee—“Lord, what a sport!” he whispered.

“It is too sweet of you even to be willing to have me, but it’s very dear of those of you who want me. I want you all (oh, Jan, what a lie!), so if I may, I’ll go six months to each house.”

There was a dead silence.

"And if I may, I'll toss up to decide to which I go first."

"Well done, indeed!" was Henry's startling comment, and following his lead, Annie signified firm approval. "Perhaps that would be best."

Sarah nodded but said nothing. Against all rules of the game of toss, she was praying, with clenched hands—"Let me have her! O God, let me have her."

"Here's a half-penny," said John. "Shall I toss?"

"Yes," said Jan, "make it the best of three. Heads, Pentre Fawr," and she smiled at Sarah—"tails, the Parade."

John tossed. "Tails," he said, and Sarah's heart missed a beat; then he tossed again. "Heads! The next one decides it!" There was silence while he spun—"Heads," he announced. "You go to Pentre, Jan."

And with that sympathy for the loser which made her no real good for games Jan crossed to Aunt Annie.

"Then I come to you in six months' time, if I may," she said.

"We shall be pleased to have you, Jan," Annie said, loftily, "and now we must be getting on. I told the car to wait, and I don't want my nice little dinner spoiled."

"Poor child," she said later, as they sat down to

their meal, "I do hope Sarah has a bit of something for her. This morning she was buying a small piece of scrag. More rice, John? I could see that Jan wanted to come to us."

The scrag end had been made into a drop of broth for the wife of one of the farm labourers, and Jan's supper consisted of roast fowl, with home-cured ham and home-made sausages, pancakes and cream, fresh bread and butter and cheese—and a cup of coffee as the master used to like it.

John turned up at the farm about eight o'clock.  
"Come for a walk," he said.

"Don't take her far, Master John," warned Sarah, "Miss Jan is looking tired."

"We'll go as far as the stream," said Jan.  
"No, Sarah, I don't want my hat."

"Come, Miss Jan, they'll be saying how funny it looks—you without a hat. You'd better take your hat."

"All right," said Jan.

"We'll cross the fields, shall we?" asked John.

Jan nodded. "Oh, John!" she said, suddenly, laying one hand on his arm, "it's a very queer feeling to come home, when all my people are away."

"Don't say 'all', darling"; he dropped back instinctively into the caressing tone he had used to her as a little girl. "You still have me, haven't you?"

For an instant a look of fear shot through Jan's gray eyes.

"Yes, I've got you, thank goodness," she answered. "Do you know, John," she continued, "what I'm looking forward to most of all?"

"No—what?"

"Do you remember the toffee Mrs. Jones, the confectioner, used to make! I do hope she makes it still."

"We'll see about it to-morrow," John answered, drily. Of course he was a fool to have thought anything, he told himself—the girl was only a child.

"What are you thinking of, John?"

"You," John answered promptly. "I'm thinking you haven't changed; you're still a little pig for sweets!"—which was, after all, the truth, if in a Bowdlerized edition. "Here we are; this way to the stream."

Jan ran forward, then stopped and looked in dismay at the trickling water, three or four inches in depth and perhaps a foot wide.

"I don't believe it," she cried, passionately; "it *was* bigger than that. It was bigger, wasn't it, John?"

John shook his head. "No!" he said, "but we were a great deal smaller—you got very wet that day you fell in."

Jan laughed, though big tears glistened on her lashes. "It's a shame," she cried. "I thought

it was nearly a river. Of course, I've grown, but not wiser you'll say. Let's go home—I mean to Pentre."

"One day," said John, "we'll go home."

"Yes, I'd like to," said Jan.

She thought he meant to take her to the "Plas"—so it was true she wasn't very worldly wise yet.

## CHAPTER XI

**I**NDEED, Miss Jan, I'm afraid you don't fancy your breakfast."

**I**"Indeed, then, Sarah, I do."

"Well, then, you let me fry you another egg and a bit of ham with it." Sarah got up, so did Jan.

"Sarah, I couldn't," she protested. "I really couldn't. Please do get on with your own breakfast."

"A drop more coffee, Miss Jan?"

"Yes, please." Jan passed up her cup. "Harvesting to-day, Sarah?" she asked.

"The men have been out these hours since. I'm going to take them a bit of dinner along when I've tidied up here."

"I'll help you, Sarah, may I?"

"No, indeed, you shan't," was Sarah's quick retort, "you be free to enjoy yourself, Miss Jan."

Jan had heard that sentence a dozen times during the last week, but it was like urging a hungry man to eat during a famine, or inviting a thirsty man to drink in a dreary desert waste.

She was trying so hard to enjoy herself, to be

contented, at any rate not to be bored and unhappy, but it was more difficult than she had ever imagined.

Sarah nipped in the bud any attempts at work; true Jan did dust her own bedroom, but she couldn't make that take long, and Sarah always did it after her to make sure.

Breakfast was at half-past seven; it was over and cleared away by eight, and then Jan looked forward to a long day with nothing to do punctuated with meals at which Sarah pressed her to eat, and at which she did eat too much.

The meals were the times Jan hated most. She hated herself, too, for it, but she never overcame her fastidious dislike of the table-manners at the farm. David had a moustache and drank loudly; he put his knife in his mouth and smacked his lips.

"What does it matter?" the girl asked herself a dozen times; "it's nothing! The man fought against drink and conquered the habit. You couldn't do that—even though you do eat quietly."

But it did matter all the same; it jarred and irritated her and she welcomed the days when he did not come in to dinner.

Jan's box of books from school had not yet arrived, and so far the only English book she had been able to find at Pentre was the Bible, and she was reading that through. But, worst of all, there was no one to talk to. David Jones seldom

opened his mouth except at meal-times and then only to feed. Sarah's conversation consisted largely of exhortations to eat more, and remarks about the weather and the advisability of Jan's not sitting on the grass, nor in the full sun, and such like matters of importance.

Jan had sought out Bessie Richards of her school days, and had found her buxom and matured, but to everything Jan said Bessie replied with a giggle—"Lor! Miss Jan, you don't say so!"

Jan knew that among her own people Bessie wasn't like that: she was a sharp and shrewd business woman in the market, one of the best hands at butter-making in the countryside, and the possessor of a rich contralto voice. But the two girls were on different planes, and Jan found herself talking down to Bessie in her efforts to make conversation, while Bessie giggled and giggled and fell back again and again on her stock phrase.

Then Billy Williams—that hero of the old school—from whom a word or two was quite an honour! Jan met him on the way home, loading hay—a late second crop—and stopped to speak to him. Billy—Willie he was now—was no fool. He was leader in the choir at the chapel and had had the prize at a Local Eisteddfod for Bass Solo. But he had not a word to say to Jan, and the girl went back to Pentre depressed and puzzled to find it much earlier in the day than she had hoped.

It was all different—even the stream—or perhaps, after all, it was only she who had changed?

Jan found Sarah in the house. “I’ve made a pancake or two for your tea, Miss Jan—you’ll like that, won’t you?”

“Sarah, you spoil me.” Jan tried to sound pleased. “Look how fat I’m getting.”

Sarah’s well-lined face relaxed into a smile. “Fat, indeed,” she echoed shrilly, “there’s nonsense you’re talking, Miss Jan. But I do want you not to be fretting while you’re with me.”

“Fretting, Sarah?” Jan was startled.

“You were looking a bit sort of quiet, Miss Jan,” Sarah went on, earnestly, “and I wanted to say as if you were fretting to go to the Parade.”

“Sarah—you’re an idiot!” said Jan. “What more could a person want than that”—she waved to the open doorway—the farmyard and the hills beyond, “and—pancakes.”

Jan had meant to say “and you,” but changed because it wasn’t fair to tell so big a lie to so dear a soul as Sarah.

Sarah beamed at the answer. “It’s a fine free life for you, Miss Jan,” she said with satisfaction. Then, with a change of tone, “That servant girl of Mrs. Owen’s who came for butter left a letter for you.”

“Aunt Annie wants to know will I go to supper there to-night,” Jan said, when she had read the note.

"You please yourself, Miss Jan," said Sarah, "indeed, perhaps you had better go, unless you'd like to come to the Prayer Meeting along of Davy and me."

It was John who had suggested the invitation. He hadn't seen Jan except in the distance since the first night. He had proposed bringing her down to tea the next day, but his mother had said: "Better let her settle down," in such a meaning way that John gave in instantly.

He had been at home now seven days—or was it seven years, and seven days in Canada?

His coming had been a mistake, he told himself, or, to be more correct, it had not been a success.

His father and mother were, of course, delighted to see him, and all that sort of thing—he acknowledged that—but there was no doubt he upset the routine of the house, and that upset his people. Henry didn't smoke, and John never seemed to be without a pipe or cigarette in his mouth, and one evening in the garden, when the midges were buzzing round, he offered his case to Annie.

"You have one, Mother," he said, "and keep the brutes away."

Annie was inexpressibly shocked, firstly that John should say such a thing, and secondly that she should have been brought into such a silly joke. John discovered that most of the things

his mother didn't quite understand were given the benefit of being "silly jokes" before they were condemned as being "not quite nice."

"Please don't say that again, John, even in joke," she said.

"Joke!" he protested. "I meant it."

"That will do, John," Henry broke in, and John grinned to himself in the twilight. "It is all so like what it used to be."

Annie bore his smoking in the house in silence—that is, she didn't actually speak about it, but her actions shouted disapproval. John's cigarette was a signal for his mother to fetch a bowl of water and place it ostentatiously in the grate, to take away the smell. A moment later she would push a saucer toward him (the house did not boast an ash-tray) and once she sprayed some toilet vinegar on a cushion.

"I can't expect Mr. John not to smoke," she said with dignity to the maid when John had betaken himself and his cigarette to the garden, "so we must put up with it, and shake the curtains well to-morrow."

John's unpunctuality annoyed Henry. If meals were fixed for certain times, why not conform to those times? John, regarding this as a holiday, was usually late for breakfast, and at the sound of the gong, which meant a meal was served, invariably disappeared for a wash.

The two men were ill at ease together, like dogs

circling round one another in antagonistic neutrality.

"We won't worry you to-night, dear," Annie said on the first night, "but to-morrow you must tell us all about everything," and she nodded and smiled toward John.

John did his best next day and gave the skeleton of a narrative, omitting all the parts that mattered.

He told them the size of the homestead—640 acres—a square mile between the four of them, and about the house built in the middle to meet Government requirements.

"You never told us about the house, John!"  
Annie interrupted.

"Oh, surely—I sent you a photograph?"

"Oh, no, dear, you only sent a picture of some shed or other."

"That was the house," said John, gravely—"it was about the size of the big hen-house, only more firm and better built."

Annie turned to her husband. "Is he joking, Henry?" she asked.

Henry shook his head with the same unreasonable irritation toward his son he'd so often felt toward his brother.

"Had you nice friends, dear?" was Annie's next inquiry.

John gave an amused guffaw. "Oh, rather," he said, "the best any man ever had."

"Then why are you laughing?" asked Henry, distantly. He was very jealous for his wife's dignity.

John saw his mistake at once. "It was the word 'nice,'" he tried to explain. "I don't think you'd like them, Mother—they're big, rough, tender-hearted chaps—but I can't quite explain," he finished, lamely.

"I quite understand, dear," said Annie, "that's quite all right."

John gave more explanations during his week at home than during the whole seven years of his absence, and each one left him more exhausted than the last.

He spent the week being re-introduced to people—to Mrs. Griffiths—to Willie—to everyone in Brynavon that mattered. Unbeknown to his people, he also picked up his acquaintance again with several of what his mother called "not respectable people." At each fresh meeting he was struck by the fact that nothing had changed to any appreciable extent. He didn't know what he'd expected, but he thought there would have been some difference except the passage of seven years.

The news that he wrote caused his people very considerable astonishment. He broke it to them one morning at breakfast. He wouldn't have mentioned it then but that he was more than half an hour late, and Henry had said, "Why on earth can't you come to time?" and Annie with

her fatal inability to hold her tongue added, "You must try, dear, not to annoy your father."

John kissed both his parents good morning. It was the only demonstrative thing he ever did, and it never failed to please Henry, but the frown of annoyance was still there, and his mother's lips as she poured out his coffee were pursed up with disapproval.

Outside the weather was glorious: from the breakfast room John could see the hills—blue in the distance—and the river winding like a silver thread till it reached the sky. He remembered that as a little boy he had thought all rivers flowed into the sky, and those were the rivers people passed over into Heaven when they died. He had, in a rare expansive moment, told his mother, and she thought it silly, which it was not, and untrue which it was. So she took John to "Step Across" where the river flows into the sea and showed it to him and said, "Now do you understand, John?"

And the boy, standing on the shore, turned his back on the sea and saw the river winding backward to the sky.

"I see, Mother, dear," he said, "it flows into the sea, and starts in the sky. That's how the new-born babies come."

Annie had been quite upset at such foolishness.

"John, dear!" Annie's tone was really exasperated, "your bacon will be quite cold."

John started, and came back to the present. Well, he'd have to tell them some time; it only meant one more explanation; so he told them then and there, and eventually it created the diversion he had hoped, though Henry received the news at first in his usual silence.

"That's very nice, dear," Annie purred, "it must run in my family. I remember my brother wrote a story once—it was very pretty—we all thought so. I don't know what he did with it."

Henry did know: he'd seen him burn it after the "Editor had regretted" for about the tenth time, but Henry knew, too, the art of keeping silent.

Besides, Annie was apt to drain a subject: her contribution was often the last, because what she said was, as a rule, so much beside the point that no one liked to speak after her.

"I called myself Owen John," volunteered John, in an effort to rouse his father.

"Fancy that, tch, tch!" clicked his mother, though it is uncertain what she meant.

"I'd like to see something of yours, John," said Henry, in what he supposed was a non-committal manner.

"Oh, rather yes, Father! You can see exactly how far I've got when I tell you I've kept a copy of every blamed thing I ever wrote," and before Annie had time to disapprove the adjective, John had gone.

Upstairs he mopped his brow. "Whew!

what a life, and what a fool I am! I'm never like this except at home."

He dumped the pile of magazines on to the table by his father with a bang that made the china clatter.

"Shall I fetch Jan here to-day?" he suggested.

"Not to-day, dear—Mrs. Griffiths will be here—or let me see—Emily's going up for butter—she shall take a little note and Jan shall come here to supper and then on to the Prayer Meeting with us."

John hoped he wasn't included in the plural, because he disliked hurting his mother, but anyhow the great thing was to get Jan there.

Henry was late at the office that morning for the first time in thirty years. His wife kept reminding him, too, but he waved her aside and read on.

"I was detained," he announced to Mr. Griffiths who had been on the point of sending Willie, now superintending clerk, up to enquire if anything were wrong.

"Care to have a look at this?" Henry said to him during the morning, handing him a magazine.

"Thank you, sir!" Willie was always deferential.

"There's a story in it by my boy—'Owen John' he signs himself."

"Oh, thank you, sir. That will be doubly interesting."

"Nincompoop," thought Henry, watching Willie's sloping form retire. "John'd make two of him." But he sighed: it would have been a fine thing, too, if John had been a steady, dependable fellow, content to live at home, willing to learn, anxious to please—John. It was not thinkable!

Henry happened to mention John's writing to most of the people he met during the day, and one man—Henry never liked him—remarked: "Well, indeed, your brother was a clever chap, too, wasn't he now?" Confound the fellow! John belonged to him—not to the other John.

Jan was nearly late for supper. "I met that Griffiths boy," she said. "How he has altered—I think everyone has changed."

"And I think no one has—except me," said John.

"And you've changed more than any one!" was Jan's reply.

"Come to supper now," Annie called them. "How do you do, Jan? I thought you weren't coming."

Jan never felt quite at ease with Aunt Annie, who ran her eyes up and down the girl, and the result apparently was so seldom quite satisfactory. Jan's frock to-day was a thin white crêpe with a high waistline, and cut in a V shape at the neck. It was very simple and hung loosely on Jan's slim figure.

"Jan!" whispered Annie as they neared the dining-room door; "here, dear."

Jan turned, and Annie slipped a brooch into her hand. "You'd better wear it," she whispered with a glance at the girl's bare neck.

Jan could have killed her aunt, but she pinned the brooch on without altering the shape of her dress, and went into supper with a heightened colour.

There was a certain loathly type of food which Jan associated with her aunt's table. It included meat done with jelly—cold parsnips, semolina pudding, and coffee made entirely with chicory. To-day, like a pentecost of horrors, they had all her pet abominations, and for the first time she appreciated the farm, where at any rate the food was above criticism.

It seemed to Jan, too, that Annie never stopped talking. Sarah, praise be, was quiet! John watched the thoughts and emotions flitting across her mobile face, but he said very little.

"Sarah would have given these to pigs at Pentre," thought Jan, toying with the obnoxious parsnips.

"Are you settling down nicely, Jan?" her aunt's voice broke in.

"Yes, thank you, Aunt Annie."

"And this meat to the dog—if he'd have eaten it."

The last sentence was not spoken aloud.

"You're not dull there?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Annie."

"And you find plenty to do?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And your uncle now—do you——"

"It's time to be going," Henry announced, pushing back his chair.

"There's a Prayer Meeting on," John explained, because Jan looked so bewildered.

She pushed back her plate with relief—the semolina hardly touched.

"Are you going?" Jan shot out the question with big, wondering eyes fixed on her cousin.

"I'll stay with you," said John, gravely. "Let's go to the garden."

"But——" began Annie.

John caught his father's eye—he was a little boy again, appealing against these woman-made laws.

"Oh, let them be, Annie," Henry muttered.

"This garden is the happy hunting ground of all the midges in Brynavon," John told Jan, "try a cigarette?"

"All right—if it won't make me sick and will keep them off. Let's sit down. When are you going away?"

"How did you guess?" John looked hard at his cousin, but she did not seem to see him.

"Oh, I don't know—and, after all, who would stay unless——"

"You're not unhappy, Jan?" The hand he touched was cold.

"No—only—John," she broke off, "have you ever read 'Aurora Leigh'?"

John nodded. Jan was sitting on the grass, her hands clasped round her knees, her big eyes fixed on his face.

"Well, it comes there about God giving the thing you want and then your not wanting it."

"God thrusts the thing we ask for in our hands  
The glove with gauntlet in't."

he quoted.

"That's it! I've always wanted to be free—and now, everyone tells me I am free. But I'm not, am I?"

"No." John spoke quickly and with decision. "Neither of us are yet! Freedom doesn't consist of living anywhere nor doing anything, I'm sure of that. It's inside a person, not out! God! If one only knew what it meant!"

"And when do you go away?"

"To-morrow!" John answered, though he hadn't known it till that moment. "I feel if I stayed another day I'd go mad."

"You've only been a week and it's your home," she reminded him.

"It's the home of my people," he corrected her. "I don't fit into this picture."

Jan sprang up and confronted him like a little

fury. "I hate you!" she panted. "I hate you! The gods give you everything. God gives it to you, if you like that better, and who are you to sneer and not to fit! And I'd give everything to have people of my very own here now with me. Oh! what wouldn't I give."

After Jan's outburst there was a silence which lasted till Annie returned, and again all the way to the farm when John took her home. For he was really annoyed with her; she ought to have known better than to speak like that—ought to have known him better, too.

Jan didn't mind whether he were vexed or not. She was angry with herself for displaying her feelings even to John, so the two walked in preoccupied silence to the gate of Pentre.

"Good-night, Jan," John said. A word from her and he would unbend.

"Oh, good-night, John"—Jan woke with a start from her reverie—"good-night and good-luck."

It wasn't until she was ready for bed that she remembered that she had not kissed him good-bye.

John left for London next morning, after a very painful scene with his people, and in the end nearly missed his train by dashing at top-speed up to Pentre.

"Jan!" he panted when she came toward him.  
"Jan, you forgot——"

"What?" she cried with a glance at her wrist watch. "Oh, John, you'll miss it."

"Good-bye, darling," he said, kissing her.

"Good-bye, John."

"Now again for last night!"

"Good-night for last night and all the nights, John, dear."

Jan watched his tall figure tearing down the lane. He stopped at the corner and waved, and Jan kissed her hand to him. Assuredly she was growing up.

John came home again for a few days at Easter, just after Jan had moved to the house on the Parade, and before he went back she had promised to be his wife.

## CHAPTER XII

JAN waved good-bye to John with a sense of relief, and as she left the station and walked up the hill, found herself reckoning how long it would be till his next visit, not from a desire to see him, but prompted by a sense of elation that it must be a good while before he could come again.

Of course she loved him, but she always had done so—it was nothing new—he was John, and she was Jan, and that was enough and there was nothing more to be said. But the fuss of the last week had disconcerted her. For instance, Aunt Annie had kissed her innumerable times and had called her “my dear little daughter,” and Jan had felt sick, and held up an ungracious, cool cheek in return. And suddenly she wanted to cry, because the people whose real daughter she was were enjoying themselves together somewhere, and it seemed a long way off.

Then Uncle Henry looked at her furtively; she could feel his eyes upon her as she moved to and fro, till she felt like an animal in the marketplace before the appraising eyes of a bidder. But he said nothing, which was even worse than Aunt Annie’s saying too much.

"Tch! tch! You are cousins, of course—I'm sure I don't know. Well, there!" and her aunt had kissed Jan again loudly. It was uncomfortable, but Uncle Henry's eyes were positively eerie. But, then, how could Jan or any one else guess at the passion of jealousy and painful anger raging behind Uncle Henry's quiet manner? He had loved John with all his heart; he had spent troubled days and sleepless nights planning for the boy's future, scheming to give the lad a chance, groping to understand what was passing in his mind. And the result had been so far blank, abysmal failure.

John was a sealed book—he had grown from youth to manhood in a strange land, and after an absence of seven years had stayed a bare seven days at home, and now, as a crowning evil, was engaged to Jan. If she had been demonstrative Henry could have forgiven her; if John had been cool, Henry would have loved her, too; but Jan accepted all John gave her with apparent indifference, making no effort either to attract or to hold him.

It made Henry wince with pain to see John with her—to watch the light in his eyes as Jan came near, and to hear the inflections in his voice when he spoke to her. He would have given years of his life if anything he could do would have awakened some response in his son.

Annie had made a thousand pretexts for leav-

ing the two together, with a wealth of nods and smiles and meaning looks, which had amused John and been lost on Jan.

Altogether, Jan's thoughts were in a chaotic state, and she was rather relieved to see Willie Griffiths coming toward her.

"Good morning, Jan."

"Hallo, Willie! Why aren't you in the office? I'll tell Uncle Henry."

Willie was one of the few people in Brynavon with whom Jan felt entirely at home—he and Mr. Evans, the minister—the same who had refused to teach her Scripture many years ago.

Willie was restful—he was as devoid of ideas as a young man in full possession of his senses can be. He had been to college at Aberystwyth and passed his examinations well, because he had common sense and a retentive memory. He took his Welsh B.A., which Mrs. Griffiths assured people, in confidence, was "really equivalent to—" She always stopped here because she was very vague what it was equivalent to, having left school herself from Standard VII, and passed her life with a closed mind.

As a daily proof of his mental powers Willie never opened a book, except works of law; he gave his whole interest to gardening, fishing, and the building of model pig sties—(he spent a whole afternoon explaining to Jan how he dovetailed boards)—and the collection of old Welsh china.

Jan argued from this last hobby that he must have ideas, only hidden deep down, but she liked him all the better because of their depth.

Willie stood smiling sheepishly down at her. Her joke was the kind he liked: it is so flattering to be thought a bit of a dog!

"I've left the office early because I'm going to run the little car into the country—on business for the firm, of course."

Jan looked up quickly. "Where are you going?" she demanded.

"Well," he said, confidentially, "really I'm going to Caerfon and it is for the firm, but I'd thought we'd come back through the woods—by the stream." He stopped. "At least I thought—I mean—if you would—if you'd like——"

"Me? Oh, Willie! Like? I should think so!" A less conceited man than Willie might well have been flattered by her eagerness, but he'd met Jan before—"straws and drowning men" and that sort of thing.

"I thought, perhaps, you'd be feeling a bit—down—Jan, you know," he stumbled on.

"What time?" asked Jan, ignoring his last words as silly.

"Oh, as soon as possible—any old time that suits you."

Jan thought for a minute or two. If she were to ask Aunt Annie, there would be difficulties; therefore she decided not to ask.

"Half an hour from now?" she suggested, "and will you come for me to Pentre?"

Jan covered the ground to the farm in record time, and found Sarah churning.

"Sarah," she began without preamble, "I'm going to run away."

"What's that, Miss Jan?" Sarah's face was as stern as the orthodox guardian's should be. "How do you mean?"

"I'm coming back to supper," Jan hurried on. "Sarah, dear," she coaxed, "be a saint and give me dinner and send down this note to Aunt Annie to break the sad news to her."

And Sarah, who would have worked herself to the bone if Aunt Annie had been ill or had needed her, wasn't proof against the temptation of helping Jan to evade her aunt. Perhaps Jan knew this—at any rate, she had a very good lunch.

"What time will you be back, Mr. Griffiths?" Sarah asked when Jan, wrapped around with rugs, was settled in the car.

"Seven," suggested Willie.

"Very well," Sarah agreed, "only"—she held up a warning finger—"mind you're to time."

Willie spent the drive talking to Jan about the stream in the woods. He had fished there once, and landed a very decent-sized trout. He rambled on about how he played and caught it; how much it weighed—about his tackle—about trifles, and Jan sat back and without listening much en-

joyed it all, as one enjoyed the hum of bees as a background to one's thoughts.

John had been a very tiring person last week; Jan felt like taut elastic after a short time in his company—she lived in fear of snapping. Willie created no tension, and he admired Jan immensely; he felt rather a good talker in her company.

At Caerfon Willie did his business—it took quite a quarter of an hour, and Jan sat in the car outside and vegetated.

"Excuse me," a man interrupted, lifting his hat, "isn't it Miss Owen?" and Jan, looking up, found herself face to face with Dick Goodyer.

"Yes, and you're Clare Goodyer's brother," said Jan; "how are you?"

"I'm very fit, thanks, and I've to congratulate you. Old John is one of the very best."

"Thank you," said Jan, "but how did you know about it? John tell you?"

Dick laughed. "John and I dig together in Town—he must have told you—only I'm taking a well-earned holiday now."

"I don't believe," said Jan, "that you ever did a stroke of work in your life. You don't look like it."

"That's libellous, Miss Owen. I assure you that I'm an ornament to the Bar—briefless, if you insist on the truth. Where's John?"

"He went back this morning." The sigh Jan heaved was one of relief.

At that minute Willie appeared, and their introduction had the effect of making Dick think Jan a bit of a fool to career about the country with a half-wit; and of rousing Willie's slow wrath that Jan should make herself conspicuous in the main street of Caerfon where everyone knew him by talking and laughing to such an arrant nincompoop as this chap Goodyer looked.

Whereas Willie was no fool—merely simple-minded and short-sighted—Dick nothing but a little “precious” with leanings toward Bohemia, and Jan ready to grasp at anything as a distraction from the heavy atmosphere of the Parade.

The afternoon was an unqualified success. Willie caught two trout, and couldn't have been more pleased if they had been salmon. Jan wandered about and picked flowers, and ate the chocolates Willie had brought her, and forgot everyone, and remembered only the warmth and the light playing among the fresh young leaves—the smell of the damp moss and the faint, delicious scent of the primroses.

And they enjoyed themselves so much that the time slipped by and they were late in starting back.

“Never mind,” said Willie, “we'll manage all right. I'll put the little beggar to it.”

But the “little beggar” didn't play up. It grunted, snorted, and groaned, slowed and bucked, and at last stopped, with a sickening air of finality.

Willie got out. "You'll find another packet of chocolate in the left pocket," was all he said. "No, I won't have any, thanks."

Jan finished the chocolate before she spoke again. "Can I help?"

She had to repeat the question twice because Willie was lying under the car, and as his refusal was emphatic she sat where she was, mooning and dreaming happily, oblivious that the trees were throwing long and ever longer shadows and that the sun was sinking over the hill.

When it had gone altogether, Jan gave a little shudder, and opened the door of the car, and at the same moment, Willie crawled out, with a goodly supply of oil on his person and a frown on his face.

"Can't be done, Jan," he announced; "we shall have to foot it. Can you? I'm most awfully sorry."

"Yes, of course; how far?"

"A seven-miler, I'm afraid—can you manage? I say—I am sorry."

"Rather," Jan cried, "I'm a champion walker."

Together they pushed the little car to the side, and Jan contributed to the general discomfort by tearing her skirt and making her hands dirty.

"I'll bicycle back as soon as we get home; I guess it'll be all right till then," Willie said. "Come along."

Jan did think of saying she'd walk alone and

send someone out to Willie, while he stayed with the car, but she knew that Willie wouldn't let her go alone, and that if he would she wouldn't dare do it.

She was a fairly good walker, but seven miles are always seven miles, especially at the end of a day, when they are nearer eight.

Willie began to pall on her. He asked her every five minutes or so whether she were feeling very tired, and she said: "Oh, no, thank you!" The only other remark which he observed with the same punctuality was that he did hope her people wouldn't be anxious, you know, and he was most awfully sorry.

It reminded her of the time she had stayed with Miss Blakeborough's married sister, and the husband had said every morning at breakfast—"Marmalade, my dear?" and his wife had answered every day, "No, thank you, dear! I don't like it." Jan used to long for her to take some one morning, just to make a break.

And suddenly she thought of John. He'd have exploded into a thousand curses, but he'd have tinkered up the car somehow—they'd never have walked home. One thing about John was that he was effective—he always got there in the end. He might tease, annoy, irritate, and anger, but he'd never be a bore.

Then Willie went lame with a blister and limped along manfully, and Jan laughed—not at him, but

at the situation; and Willie laughed, too, and said it was dashed funny, but he didn't think so. Jan had begun to pall on him.

Up the hill to Capel Seion they tramped—down the road to the forge—and over the level crossing where in days gone by Jan had put crossed pins on the track, and the express train had flattened them into baby scissors. Only Sarah had stopped it because she said it was dangerous.

"Only one hill more, though a long one, and then the lights of Brynavon twinkle on the plain—and there's only the last lap."

"Thank goodness," said Willie; he was walking with one shoe off now, but the grit had worked through to his sock.

"What is the time?" asked Jan.

"Half-past nine," Willie admitted, but if it had been past midnight, his tone could not have been more lugubrious.

Aunt Annie and both maids were in the hall—and Sarah. Henry, in the dining-room, was sitting before the fire, but he didn't begin to read till he heard Jan's voice in the hall.

Willie's reception was very cool, in spite of his apologies.

"The car broke down," he repeated, "and we had to walk. I am most awfully sorry, Mrs. Owen."

There was a frown on Sarah's face which Jan didn't like to see—a deep furrow between the

eyebrows, showing not anger but anxiety. Aunt Annie reminded her of a flustered hen and could be dealt with later.

"Oh, Sarah," said Jan, sinking on to a hard chair in the hall, "I am tired."

"You'll go straight to bed then, Miss Jan—if I may be so bold, ma'am." Sarah turned to Mrs. Owen, who nodded a stately acquiescence.

So there wasn't much scolding that night, but Jan was helped to undress and had supper carried up to her, and Sarah fussed round generally, and enjoyed herself immensely.

Jan was so seldom amenable to petting, and Sarah still remained childless, except for that first one—and Jan.

But Annie was, however, a stickler for duty and discipline, and her lecture lost nothing by being kept a night.

"Good morning," she said in a perfunctory way, when Jan appeared at the breakfast table. "I am most vexed with you, Jan. So thoughtless, and what will John say? Your uncle is very annoyed with you." Henry drank his porridge milk noisily. He looked impassive, but then he always did, except with John.

Jan said nothing—it was a fish day—haddock—and she didn't like haddock, so she toyed round with her food, turning it over and over. But Annie was roused this morning—on John's behalf, if you please.

"Now, Jan, eat your breakfast—it's very wasteful the way you leave good food, and they say the mustard people make a fortune out of what is left on plates; and the idea of your going off without a word. Just a note! Tch, tch, tch! Poor boy!"

"Do you mean Willie's blistered foot?" Jan asked with studied insolence, pushing the plate aside.

"I meant John!" snapped her aunt, "and why don't you eat your fish?"

Jan ignored the question but opened her eyes wide. "Poor old John," she said, "what's the matter—is he ill?"

Annie rang the bell with most unnecessary vigour. "More milk, please," she said to Emily.

Jan put on her hat, when the meal was over, with flaming cheeks and tingling ears. She had brought it on herself. Aunt Annie had given it from the shoulder this time, pouring forth a tirade to the effect that young girls, more especially young girls who were engaged, and in particular young girls engaged to her son John, did not gallivant about the countryside with other young men and come home at all hours of the night! There was a great deal more or, perhaps, it was only the same expressed in different words. In the end, Aunt Annie had drawn herself up for her peroration: "Believe me, Jan, it is not respectable."

Jan read Classics three mornings a week with

Mr. Evans, the Methodist minister, and her name was entered for Girton for October. He wasn't perhaps much of a classical scholar, but he had the feeling and he knew quite enough to teach Jan, and the hours spent with him over the "Bacchæ" and "Medea"—"Plautus" and "Virgil" were the happiest she spent in Brynavon.

This morning she was like lead; she was heavy and dull, and at last the old man closed his book with a slam. "We'll try again to-morrow," he said, standing up to dismiss her. "You're not with me to-day."

Jan didn't move: she had hardly heard what he had said all the morning—her mind was running on Aunt Annie's closing words.

"Mr. Evans," she said, looking up at him, "I'm thinking. I don't mind about right and wrong, but it's those things which aren't either—but just take colour from the people who do them or from other people's opinion—I can't explain."

But Mr. Evans gathered her drift. News spreads quickly in a small town, and everyone knew that Willie Griffiths' car had broken down and Jan Owen had come home walking, and Mrs. Owen—— He knew the Mayor's wife, too, and the Mayor, and he was fond of Jan.

"You can't get away from it," he said, decisively, "no one can. In what we call convention there's no room for original thought. Will you

bring your ‘Plautus’ on Thursday? We’ll start the ‘Rudens’—shall we?”

Jan stood up and walked to the door. “Yes, thank you. ‘Plautus,’ you said, Mr. Evans. Good-bye.”

But the minister blocked the way. “Listen here, girl fach,” and laying his hand on Jan’s arm he said, “I’m old enough to be your grandfather, and I remember well your father coming to me about you, and your mother, poor girl.”

“Oh!” Jan’s face dimpled into smiles, and Aunt Annie and the rest vanished into thin air. Here was someone who really knew—who was a link between her and her people. “Tell me all about them,” she cried. “I’ve forgotten so much: as I go on they seem to go back!”

“So I will tell you—but another time. About your question—the things you can’t do stand like a barrier. It’s easy enough to get over it, but,” he spoke impressively, “it’s impossible to get back.”

“Then one is always caged?” said Jan.

“Yes, always, but the cage is big enough not to gall, and those outside would give their lives to be in.”

It was a confirmation of Miss Rivers’s “freedom within the law,” only at school the rules had been hard and fast. In Brynavon they were vague and nebulous up to the point where you hit yourself against them, and then they hurt you. Oh,

Aunt Annie was a fool, and John and Willie, and the biggest fool of all was Jan, but she couldn't be expected to admit that.

Jan's life from Easter to October was like a dark road, illuminated at long distances by flares. That is, her "rows" with Aunt Annie were the only breaks in the monotony. She could have been fairly contented if she had been allowed to work; but Girton had grown to be a vexed question. Aunt Annie thought it a waste of time for Jan to go to college, now that she was engaged, and Sarah, when appealed to, said: "Miss Jan must please herself." John wanted to get married in the autumn; Henry's contribution was silence; and Jan, like the obstinate little mule she was, refused to listen to reason.

Miss Blakeborough even wasn't helpful. She wrote to Jan in reply to the girl's perplexed letter: "You must decide for yourself, only do remember that if dogs don't follow the scent, they lose it."

Jan crumpled the letter up and threw it in the fire. She was difficult to live with at present—moody, irritable, and unhappy.

In September John came down for a week, and things went wrong from the beginning.

Annie went to meet the train, and Jan forgot the time and arrived a minute late and then said: "Cheerio, John—how are you? I believe you're fatter."

Annie didn't say more than a word or two about

Jan's being late, but just enough to spoil the walk home, and when after supper she said: "Now you children had better have a short walk," Jan answered: "I'm not going, thank you—I'm tired—I'm off to bed. Good-night!"

The next morning Jan went to Mr. Evans for Latin and John loafed about the garden, and listened to his mother's complaints, though she would have said she didn't mention Jan to him.

"Let's go to Step Across," said John at lunch. "I'd like to see the sea. Come, Jan?"

"All right, I don't mind. Let's bathe, shall we?"

"Certainly not!" said Annie. "It's not safe on an outgoing tide."

"I've done it before," Jan argued.

"You wouldn't have done it, my child, if I'd been there," John cut in. "There's the dickens of a current, and I should have to rescue you. Headlines in big type: 'Shocking Bathing Fatality on Welsh Coast—two lives lost!'"

"John," said Henry, with startling sharpness, "drop it."

Step Across is a tiny village on the mouth of the river. When the tide is out, the sands stretch for miles, and the whole population of the hamlet turn out cockling, and little boats ply up and down the stream, which looks in parts narrow enough to step across. Only it isn't really. But on the turn, the sea rushes in with a sweep filling the whole

bay, and justifying the claims of the village to be a seaside resort. Bathing is safe enough on a full or incoming tide—but on the ebb there is a strong current seaward, and year by year a certain toll of human lives is paid by the foolhardy, the headstrong, and the weak.

The train runs from Brynavon to Step Across in twenty minutes, yet both John and Jan found the time long.

Jan knew she was behaving badly, and the knowledge made her worse. John knew it, too, but expected things to clear up. He'd been the same way himself, and could sympathize, but he was growing the least bit impatient.

"Let's go along to the rocks," said Jan.

"Righto! Look, Jan, at that little chap out there—I like the brown sails." A fishing smack was riding gallantly out at sea, and John stood watching.

"Like to go out, Jan?" he asked, suddenly, "that is if I could find old Sammy? He'd lend me the boat."

For a moment, Jan wavered. "I'm going to bathe," she said in a would-be careless voice.

"Oh, no, darling—sorry, but the tide's well on the ebb."

"It's only just turned, excuse me, and it's perfectly safe."

"Nonsense, Jan, look for yourself. You can see it's running out fast."

"I'm going to bathe, anyhow—please let me pass."

John didn't move.

"Jan, darling, don't be silly. You can't bathe to-day; it's not safe. Let's go fishing. Come on."

Jan planted her feet firmly, like an obstinate little animal.

"John, you may as well make up your mind to it. I'm going to bathe. I'm a very strong swimmer, as you know."

They stood facing one another; then, suddenly, John changed his tactics.

"Jan, please don't bathe. I ask you not to. Just to please me. Will you?"

"If I give in now," thought the girl, "I shall always have to! I must make a stand."

"I'm sorry," she said, aloud, "but I'm going to bathe."

But when she stood on the slab in her bathing-dress a few minutes later, the water seemed grim and menacing in spite of the sunlight, and a little human life could so easily be a plaything for the cruel waves, to be snapped and tossed aside.

John came and stood beside her. The danger wasn't great—there was a tide, of course, but he was a very powerful swimmer—it was Jan who was a danger to herself.

"Come back, darling," he urged.

"Stand away, John," she cried, and dived in—

a slim, curved figure cutting the water. She sported for several minutes—swam and dived—then shook the water off her and ran away to dress.

John sat on a rock and smoked and looked out to sea, but he didn't see the view—he was thinking too hard.

Five minutes later, Jan appeared, her short hair rough and damp, her face aglow, and her eyes gleaming.

John looked up as she came toward him but did not speak or smile, and Jan stood beside him for a minute or two in silence, rubbing her hair.

"All square, John?" she asked at last, with an uncanny shy feeling, laying her hand on his knee. She'd won, but had it been worth it, and anyhow, what was the matter with John?

John took the pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes, and put it back in his pocket before he answered.

"Not quite yet, Jan—give me your hand."

Jan thought he was going to shake hands, but John held it, and slowly pulled off the ring he had given her.

"Now we're quits," he said, gravely.

"John!" Her face was so frightened that he nearly returned it to her straight away.

"You see," he went on, still holding her hand, which went suddenly cold, "you don't care a tinker's curse for me—no, you don't, not really. You are fairly willing to use me to get away from

Brynavon. Well, I'm not going to be used for that—see? I'm going to set you free."

For a moment she thought he was joking, but one glance at his face removed that impression.

"And, Jan," he went on, "remember this: you can always have the ring if you want it—but by God! you'll have to ask for it this time."

Jan pulled her hand roughly away. "Good!" she cried, "the ring can be yours for ever—I'm glad to be free of you. Yes, ever so glad."

And then she spoilt the effect by bursting into tears.

"Have mine!" said John, when she had searched in vain for the handkerchief, which had been blown into the sea.

Jan took it and dried her eyes.

"Thank you, John," she said, trying to laugh, "this—this makes you one up."

## CHAPTER XIII

JAN began her life at Girton by falling down in the passage. Many people do I believe: the floors of the New Wing are parquet and polished, and it is said to be possible to pick out in Cambridge, by their walk, the men who lecture at Girton. They move with the slow, deliberating movement of a broody hen treading on eggs, and Agog, with his sore, bastinadoed feet, could not have made his way more delicately than they do.

Jan blushed, sprang up, and was taken along by a snub-nosed boy in buttons, to be introduced to the Mistress. But the gingerly way she walked was indicative of her outlook for the rest of the term. She was rather suspicious of her ground, and any friends she made owed that privilege to their own exertions rather than to her encouragement.

John had given her a bad blow, and she had made a solemn vow that it was the last he or any one should ever have the chance of giving.

So she held herself aloof in body and in spirit, and found things very dull.

“How do you like being here?” Jan was asked at one of the innumerable tea-parties she attended the first term. The hostesses were two Third

Years—the visitors, freshers, with a Third Year to act as chucker-out in case the guests stayed too long.

"Oh, I like it," Jan answered in her best affected manner, "no one cares about any one else whether they live or die—it's lovely."

There was polite laughter at her reply, but when the party was over the chucker-out went back for a second tea, as was the way in the good days.

"Her nose is out of joint," she said with her mouth full, "and she wants to pretend it's not!"

Fairly shrewd guess that—and now look at Jan's letter to Sarah:

DEAR SARAH:

It's lovely here, and I want you to come up some time to see my room. Cambridge is wonderful, and Mona McEvoy, my friend from school, is up here, too, and I believe the Goodyers have moved somewhere near.

Of course I'm awfully busy, but I'm enjoying it.

Love from

JAN.

But when the letter was finished, Jan sat staring straight ahead of her.

There were a few facts she hadn't mentioned such as that her tutor thought her reading list very slight; that amid every inducement to work Jan felt disinclined for anything but dreaming, or that there was somewhere inside her a sullen, aching pain, like when the live coal fell on her hand when she was making toast.

John, of course, was preposterous: whatever she had done, it wasn't fair to dash back to town without a word, without giving her a chance. She wasn't sure what she wanted the chance for. To give the devil his due, he had made things as easy as possible for her in Brynavon. So he ought! :

"Jan and I have been talking things over, Mother," he had said to Annie in front of Jan, "and we both feel we have made a mistake. You'll understand that we don't want to discuss it, either of us, won't you, dear, and that, of course, it makes no difference to Jan's and my affection for each other?" And then he had gone back to town next day, and hadn't said good-bye, though Jan had hung round in the garden waiting, and had missed going to Mr. Evans. She had heard him say, "Oh, say good-bye to Jan for me, will you, Father?" and Henry had given the message, "John asked me to say good-bye." It was curious that his anger at Jan's engagement was nothing compared to his anger when it was broken, but as Aunt Annie said often, "With men, you never can tell—well, there!"

Jan dug her pen into the blotting paper viciously, and broke the nib.

She didn't care an atom what John said or did, she didn't even hate him; she was indifferent; and to show it she pulled out the photograph he had given her and stuck it in the middle of the mantelpiece.

There was a knock at the door and Mona appeared. She was a tall, angular girl, whose good looks consisted in her appearance of good health and temper.

She had masses of sandy hair coiled into a tight knot at the neck, blue eyes, and more freckles than should fall to the lot of any one person. She was nearly always happy, and invariably good-tempered, with a child's mind and the loyalty of a dog, and an unlimited capacity for enthusiasm. She played hockey and tennis on the hard courts, and swam, and spoke at Debate, and was regular at lectures, and changed every night for Hall, and was all that a keen, intelligent fresher ought to be.

Jan didn't like games, and when she found that the water in the swimming bath was only changed once a—(let's leave that)—she wouldn't put a toe in.

The first debate had been on the original subject of "Genius *versus* Common Sense," and Jan had refused to go; she said there were no two points of view on the subject.

So she pursued her way in lonely splendour, and came to the conclusion that the rôle of altar is dull unless others play up and bring offerings. It took her the best part of a term to discover this, and yet there are still cynical people who cavil at education for women.

"My dear, why didn't you come to Hall?"  
Mona asked.

"Hall!" Jan looked down at the little clock on the desk. "Have I missed it? I never heard the bell!"

Mona laughed indulgently. "My dear Jan, you must be in love."

It was a silly thing to say, Mona admitted it afterward, but really there was no need for Jan to have made such a scene, and carry on like a fish-wife. It made a person look such a fool to be taken up literally like that.

Mona stood with her hand on the door-knob, rather annoyed. "Very well, then, Jan, there's nothing more to be said," and went out, slamming the door behind her.

The draught caught a big photograph standing in the middle of the mantelpiece and blew it on to the floor.

"All right!" grunted Jan. "This thing's a nuisance, anyhow," and, picking up the photograph, she threw it on the fire.

Mona went straight back to her own room. She lived in Chapel and Jan in Woodlands—though they have changed the names now to North and East, or something equally futile, and Jan was pretty much annoyed about it when she went up the other day, and found someone swanking in her room just as she used to swank.

Mona sat down to work. Every evening from eight to nine she had read "Medea" with the help of a dictionary and Professor Gilbert Mur-

ray's translation—or is "version" the better word? For some people think there's more Murray than Euripides in the Professor's work, and that that is the reason of its great popularity among students. Mona was a very poor scholar and had never got further than Medea's speech that "the weariest way that a man may wend is forth from the home of his father."

Then she had begun again, because she had read of some illiterate man who attained to Greek scholarship through reading one book until he had steeped himself in it, and the language had burnt itself into his memory and consciousness indelibly, and then, suddenly, the mist had cleared away, all the Greek language lay before him like open country—a problem no longer, for he knew how to read the map.

The idea had taken Mona's fancy, and here she was again—the twenty-ninth night in succession—reading "Medea."

There was a bang on her door—a kick rather than a knock—and Jan appeared, with a pearly-white face bathed in perspiration, and venomous words on her tongue.

"My hands are hurting like Hades," she announced, showing two ugly surface burns.

"However did you do it, Jan?" Mona asked, as she hurried her along to the Assistant House-keeper.

"I'm beastly hungry," said Jan, though that

didn't answer the question—and, anyhow, the photograph had been saved. "Come round to Tray."

"Tray" is an institution which time has swept away. Long ago, when the world was young and all, the authorities were solicitous for the perfect health of young life entrusted to their care, and supplied to each student a tray with saucepan, milk and cocoa, roll and butter. And the students, equally solicitous, supplied jam and cake and "trayed" at nine with an astonishing vigour considering Hall at seven.

Jan sat with her two bandaged hands on her lap, and Mona waited on her.

"Oh, by the way, who d'you think I saw in Cambridge this morning?" Mona passed Jan a roll.

"I haven't the slightest—— Don't burn the milk, Mona."

"Don't be an ass, Jan," Mona grinned, "considering your hands. Well, anyhow, Clare Goodyer. She's staying with her sister who married a man at John's—or Caius——"

"Emmanuel," said Jan.

"Yes, of course. How did you know? And Clare said would you and I go there to tea on Sunday?"

"All right—I don't mind much."

"Mind, indeed!" echoed Mona. "I'm awfully keen to go. I met a girl who stayed with the

Goodyers and she said that the brother, Dick Goodyer, is simply ripping."

"He's all right," said Jan, in a patronizing way, "he was very friendly with J——, with my cousin.

"But he won't be there now, will he?"

"Oh, no—he's in town. They dig together."

So it was disconcerting when Mona and Jan arrived at the house on Sunday afternoon that the first person they met was Dick and the second John.

And since Jan blushed like fire, and stammered with surprise, it was doubly disconcerting to see John as cool as a cucumber and as kindly as a benign old gentleman to a shy child.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Jan turned to Dick, after greeting John brusquely.

"No? We're only up for the day. John is incorrigibly lazy and I just managed to snatch a day from my arduous labours, eh, John?"

But John was laying himself out to entertain Mona, and delighted giggles showed that his efforts were being appreciated.

"Let's sit down," said Jan, choosing a seat from which John was easily seen.

"How do you like Girton?" Dick was no fool, but even if Jan weren't attending, she shouldn't give herself away.

"I love it, thank you. I forget where you were!"

"I honoured Caius," said Dick, gravely. Either

John ought not to play the fool or Jan should learn to look less like a stray dog. It was an absurd situation.

"Are you going to Wales for Christmas?" he went on.

"No, I'm going to stay in town with Miss Blakeborough in her flat."

"Shall we do a theatre or two?"

"Thanks awfully. I'd love to," Jan answered, only half hearing what he said.

"Look here, Dick," John lounged across the room, "you can't monopolize Jan—I'll introduce you to Miss McEvoy. Come along."

Dick suffered himself to be led away and Jan's heart beat furiously, as, the introduction over, John came toward her. But at that moment Clare disengaged herself from a group at the other end of the room and reached her first.

"My dear!" she said, "you have grown thin. Girton doesn't agree with you, does it, Mr. Owen?"

"There never was very much of Jan," answered John, wondering for the hundredth time whether he had done right or not, "and how do you think I'm looking?"

"I've never seen you better!" Jan shot out. "You've not lost much sleep." She decided to find out the best stuff to make fat. How she hated John!

John grinned. "Thank you, Jan," and then Clare talked all the time, till John said: "Jan,

what do you think is the matter with Miss McEvoy? She's making distress signals to you."

"She thinks it's time to go," said Jan, slowly, standing up, "and so do I."

"We'll come along a bit, shall we?" It was John's suggestion, but Jan did think Mona needn't have been quite so blatantly glad about it. For her own part she didn't relish the thought of that *tête-à-tête* along the flat, never-ending Huntingdon Road.

But she found the walk worse than she had ever imagined—longer and more tedious, as she tramped beside Dick Goodyer, straining her ears to catch the sound of John's voice in the darkness behind her.

When she got back she tore the charred photograph to bits, and spent the rest of the evening piecing it together again, and though she made a very creditable job of it, she kept it in her drawer.

"I'm not engaged to John any longer," Jan volunteered to Miss Blakeborough the first night of the Christmas vacation. She was sitting curled up on the Chesterfield and the Head lounged in an armchair opposite her, in the flat at Westminster.

"No?" The Head was purposely non-committal. "What was the matter?"

"Perhaps, really, it's more truthful to say John's not engaged to me," admitted Jan, "but I don't want to be either. Still, he did break it, but I am glad."

"Good," said the Head, sitting upright, "then everyone's pleased."

"I suppose so—yes." Jan's tone was doubtful.  
"Sometimes I don't know what I do want."

"I know what you need," said the Head, drily, as she opened a book, "but you're too big to get it."

"Well, he needs it, too," retorted Jan, angrily, "and more than I do, and I don't know what you mean, anyhow."

Jan was finding it hard to be honest with herself. She missed John dreadfully but she didn't want him, not unless he was with someone else, and anyhow, of course, since he didn't want her— It was a chaotic muddle and spoilt things, because she couldn't forget him.

Dick turned up and he and Jan went off to two or three theatres.

But it wasn't much fun taking her out, because however they began they always ended by talking of John.

Once Jan met him in the street, but he was striding along, head on high, and didn't see her, and though she walked that way every day at the same time, she never saw him again, and at last Willie Griffiths happened to mention in his letter that "old John is home again, but, of course, you know that."

Jan spent the whole of her first year in finding her feet. She mooned about a good deal and read prodigiously—good, bad, and indifferent

stuff—in no way connected with her “shop,” and in the First Year’s Mays was classed a low third.

“I’ve read an awful lot of English,” she suggested to her tutor, who said, untruthfully, that she had expected a Second, but as far as Jan could gather that wasn’t considered altogether good enough in view of the fact that she was supposed to be reading Classics.

In the long vacation Jan forgot that Girton, Cambridge, England, even Wales existed. She went to Switzerland for the first time and was as badly bitten as any one could be.

It was Miss Blakeborough’s suggestion, though Sarah helped, and they stayed at a tiny village in the Engadine a few miles from the Italian frontier and not far from a gay little town.

They didn’t trouble the town much, except for tea at a wonderful *pâtisserie*; in fact, they did very little. A short walk up to some spot whence there was view, and then Jan flung herself on the grass and looked and feasted her eyes—simply existing.

“It’s good enough just to be,” said Jan one morning. “I don’t want to do anything.”

She was sitting on a rock in the middle of a stream, eating an apple. Her shoes and stockings were on the bank beside her hat, and now and again dangling a long white leg she dipped her foot into the rushing water, and then pulled it out quickly because it was so cold and sent shivers all up her back, and the little stream dashed on

importantly in the way little streams have, trying to pretend that it was really something of a mountain torrent.

Jan drew her knees up to her chin, and munching her apple looked down on the chalets in the valley with dreamy, quiet eyes. She was more contented than she had been for years.

"I think," she said over her shoulder, though without looking behind her, "that a life like this really is free, don't you?"

Miss Blakeborough, to whom she thought she was speaking, had just turned the bend of the path and was out of earshot, but a man who was passing stopped, and looked at her with a superior smile on his lean face. He was of medium height, with rough gray tweeds which were too big for him, bold, piercing eyes, and a weak mouth. His hair, which was longer than is usually worn, was blown about by the wind, and enhanced his general appearance of scantiness.

"Free!" he said with a disagreeable little laugh; "you know nothing of freedom."

"I didn't speak," said Jan, turning quickly on him.

"Oh, pardon me, I heard you," the man answered, "but you are doubtless one of those who worship at the shrine of convention, and therefore cannot understand or appreciate freedom in the true and complete sense of the word. Free!" he laughed again, mockingly.

"I'm happy to amuse you," said Jan, coldly, and looked him up and down in her most detached way. After all, she was a Girton student, with all that entailed, and to be able to conduct a dignified controversy with bare head and legs and a half-eaten apple in one hand argues some ability and a pleasing disregard of Mrs. Grundy.

"I laughed," said the man, "because you're playing with freedom, like a child pretending to drive by holding the reins. Why, your kind are slaves to orthodoxy, bound by the closest ties to convention, fettered and hampered at every turn."

"I don't know what you mean, and I really don't very much care." Jan's tone was icy.

"There you are," said the man. "'Will you be free?' said I, 'No—an I love my bounds,' quoth she. Good-bye—stick to your Paradise of Fools—perhaps it's better than none," and with a wave of his hand he passed on down the mountain-side.

"Impudent fool!" thought Jan. "I'm as free as he is," but she didn't know how free he was so it wasn't much use saying that.

Miss Blakeborough was tired that afternoon and stayed in the hotel garden, but Jan went out alone. On the hillside she came upon a crucifix from which the image of the dying Lord looked down with half-veiled, agonized eyes on the passersby.

Jan gazed at the figure with repugnant interest. Her religion was rather nebulous. Her father had started it years ago, after the rebuff the old

minister had given him, and he had taught Jan the Commandments, and told her all the stories he could remember—Adam and Eve—Noah, Moses, Joseph, Daniel, Jonah. Jan could remember she had wept bitterly about the baby Jesus not having a proper bed, and the first wet afternoon had made a shrine in the coach-house, and Sarah had made her pull it down. “There’s no ‘arm done, Miss Jan, but it won’t do.” Jan-John had been the baby, and Jan had pulled off her hair to indicate an infant’s bald head.

There had been Scripture lessons at school, the Parables—“the field is the world and the seed is the Gospel” kind of lesson, and later the Acts—Paul’s missionary journeys, and Nehemiah’s building of the Walls of Jerusalem. But religion *qua* religion had appeared to Jan very dull—church on Sunday, and Wednesday evening Prayer Meeting, with Temperance and Watcher’s Band thrown in. It had to be practised in daily life, of course, because unless the majority of people were honest, truthful, and decent-living, society couldn’t exist.

After the Mays, Jan had got hold of a book on the Jesus of History, trying to show that the God-head had really been man, and was as much an historical personage as other great figures. The book had entranced Jan, and as she looked at the crucifix, it struck her afresh that the image was that of a man in mortal suffering, and He had brought it on Himself—He had chosen—He

had been free to choose. That shrinking, distorted figure stood for Freedom.

She started impatiently and moved on. It didn't matter where she began, she always returned, not to freedom, but to the perplexing discussion of how to attain it.

Two peasant women with large bundles on their backs came slowly up the hill, halted before the Cross, and laid aside their burdens; then, having made their reverence, knelt in prayer.

Jan watched them at their devotions and stood looking after them till they disappeared out of sight, and then made a furtive bob to the figure on the Cross. "If only You would speak and tell me," she said, "it would make such a difference."

She was very late for dinner that evening. She had been thinking of the Christ on the way home, and turned into the little church to look for a Bible, to see if she could find out why He had let them crucify Him. But when she arrived she remembered that there are not Bibles scattered about in a Catholic church so her walk had been in vain.

But the church was quaint and cool and Jan went in.

The Cross again and its burden! That symbol of suffering seemed to dominate the whole place.

She slipped into a pew and leant forward, gazing into the shadows. "Show me what it is, as well as how to get it," she whispered.

As she came out into the sunlight, she wondered whether any one had seen her. She was Protestant and she went up to the little Catholic chapel to pray; that was free enough from orthodoxy, surely.

"Jan," said Miss Blakeborough after dinner, "I want to introduce to you the son of an old friend of mine. I met him this afternoon—Mr. Ronald Waring—Miss Owen."

Jan turned, to find the man she had spoken to on the mountain standing at her side.

"I saw Miss Owen this afternoon," he said. promptly.

"This morning, you mean?" Jan remarked with an insolent indifference.

"No, this afternoon," Waring persisted. "I was sketching on the hillside and just turned into the chapel to have a look round, but I saw Miss Owen there. Funny thing Protestants can't help praying in Catholic churches. It makes 'em feel broad-minded and heterodox, like a maiden aunt in Paris."

"I think," said Jan, afterward, "he's quite the loathliest little toad I've ever met."

All the same she took an extra long time dressing next morning, and sat where she thought no one could miss seeing her.

But Ronald Waring passed by, immersed in the morning paper, and Jan, after a minute, followed like a child enchanted by the Piper's music.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE clock on the mantelpiece struck one. John pushed back his chair and stretched himself. On the table by his side lay sheet upon sheet of closely written manuscript, but he had finished to-night, thank goodness. At the beginning, writing had seemed to him a pleasant, clean way of earning a livelihood, provided that ideas flowed, and editors took his stuff. But the beginnings of success had whetted his appetite, and every fresh acceptance goaded him on to further work, until the last contract, that is really the first he had ever had, chained him to his desk in the little house in St. John's Wood, and kept him hard at it until the small hours of the morning in the middle of August. And what an August, too! Day after day the sun rose in a cloudless sky and poured its scorching rays down on London. The pavements were so hot that they hurt the feet of the passersby, the water in the canal shrank to half its usual depth, and an unhealthy smell pervaded the neighbourhood. The earth in the small gardens was baked to a brick-like substance and the plants wilted and died.

And John stayed on in town and worked, be-

cause he had accepted a contract for six stories at £50 each, the editor to reserve the right of refusing two, should they prove unsuitable.

It was a stupendous lift-up for him. It might not be the kind of pay that the demi-gods in fiction received, but so far his stories had been about the two-guineas-a-thousand style, so even if London had been twice as hot and stuffy and the canal's smell worse than it was, John would have stayed.

But he had finished at last, and glad as he was to have it over, he was half afraid the work wasn't good, because he liked it so much. That was always the trouble: he couldn't help admiring his own work—not because he thought it was good, but because it was his own.

Work had been the stand-by during the last year.

All his life he had meant to marry Jan, all his life he had been in close touch with her, if only by letter, so it had left a big blank when, after the engagement was broken, Jan drifted away and passed out of his life altogether. He might have written to her; he might have behaved differently when he saw her that time in Cambridge, but he couldn't. Jan wanted him back—if she wanted him at all—on her terms; he wanted her on his.

The problem had aged John. He thought it out in the long hours of the night when he sat smoking and gazing into the fire, or when unable to sleep he had paced half London. John had wor-

ried his father—Jan worried John—but if Henry had known, he wouldn't have felt avenged, only wildly and madly indignant with the girl.

But by the end of a year, John had come to the conclusion that Jan must go her way; he wouldn't attempt to influence her. Did he love her? That was rather a foolish question, because he loved Jan as naturally as he breathed. At present she was wrong and foolish and inconsiderate and lots of other things which were annoying, but then she was Jan and therefore he loved her.

And if things never came right, if Jan never came back to him; well, anyhow, Jan would have been free—aye and he would be free, too. He'd fight it out somehow—his love for her shouldn't bind him.

A knock at the door interrupted his sombre reflections, though young men crossed in love ought not to consider at one o'clock in the morning when they have finished the last story of their first contract.

Dick Goodyer came in, robed in a wonderful silk dressing-gown of scarlet and blue.

“I saw your light and heard you tramping. Finished?”

“Yes, thank the Lord,” said John. “Have a cigarette?”

“Thanks.” Dick took one, and flung himself into a chair.

“What a sight you look, man!” said John, dispassionately. “Scarlet women and peacocks and

blue moons all mixed. What made you buy such an infernal thing?"

"Pretty sauc-ee, isn't it? There was another of green and yellow, but it struck me as bilious; and, talking of sights, my boy, you'd do well enough for a freak show. You look as washed-out as you jolly well can." Dick's slim body seemed the picture of repose, but under the inertia his mind was working.

Thankless job interfering with another fellow's girl, but from all accounts Jan was making a pretty average ass of herself in Switzerland.

John waited with more patience than he usually showed, though why the devil old Dick couldn't choke up what he'd got to say, right out, instead of sitting there like a broody hen, beat him.

"I've finished to-night," John said aloud. "Three months on the six of 'em, not bad. Lord! how glad I'll be to get away."

Dick sat up. "Where are you going—home?"

"No—the Mater and Father are going to the Wells—they go every year. They drink waters that smell like bad eggs, and get up early, and Father plays golf, and Mother goes up to the Club House to tea. Jolly good for those who like it—I don't—I back the sea every time."

"What about goin' abroad for a bit? Switzerland now!"

John threw the stump of his cigarette in the waste-paper basket.

"If you've anything to say, Dick, say it, and have it over," he remarked. Of course, he was always going to leave Jan alone, but, naturally, he wanted to know. Confound the fool! Why didn't he get on?

Dick stood up and leaned against the mantelpiece for support—moral and physical. "Not my affair, you know, only Clare wrote me this morning. She'd heard from Jan, and Jan's pretty well *éprise*, don't you know, with some fellow out there, and I didn't know whether you'd want to cut in."

"No!" said John after a pause. "Jan's free to do what she likes. Is the fellow all right?"

"In my opinion he's a putrid sort of ass—long hair and dirty nails, a Bolshevik-Nihilist-Fabian rolled into one. Only I gather he talks more than he acts. He's a Cambridge man, too—third year in my first."

"What's his name?"

"Waring—R. L. Waring—I don't know what he does for a living when he's at home. Talks, I guess."

"Umph!" John rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Thanks for telling me," he said at last, "but it's not my affair. I haven't any right to interfere. Miss Blakeborough's with her."

"Yes—oh, rather. So long! I'm off to bed now."

The door closed behind Dick, but opened again

almost immediately. "I'm off to Wales to-morrow, you know—sea and all that. Come along."

"I'll see," said John; "thanks. Good-night."

Dick went to bed feeling qualified for the Diplomatic Service. He'd given old John his chance, and John didn't want it, so then he had given Clare the chance, which she did want. And if John came to Laugharne and bathed and boated and prawned and walked, surely it was up to Clare to do the rest.

John didn't sleep for hours after Dick left, and when he did, he dreamed of a picture in his mother's spare room at home, of the man from Macedonia crying: "Come over and help us." Only the man had Jan's face, and Macedonia had for a background some fine Alpine scenery; and when, in his dream, John answered the call, the man with Jan's face turned and said, coldly: "What dirty nails you have!" and John awoke, and for the first time in his life, went and had his nails manicured.

"I'll come with you," he told Dick, "if you'll wait till to-morrow."

"Can't let the others know. You come to-morrow and we'll come in to meet you—Clare or I"; and the diplomatist went off, in the best of spirits, for there is no good opinion so well worth having as one's own.

John loitered about restlessly, but he devoted a certain time to making inquiries about Mr. Waring, and the result of his labours did not please him,

and the clothes he packed in his bag were more suitable for an Alpine holiday than for Wales. Lastly he telegraphed Miss Blakeborough, giving nothing but his address, and went off on his holiday without any pleasurable anticipation.

Clare met him at the station.

"Hallo!" she cried, "I'm so glad you've got here. Will you trust yourself to me? Dick was stopped coming at the last moment."

"Good enough," said John; "I'm thankful to leave that wretched train. There were ten of us in the carriage—just like a family party—all so chatty. I said I had a wife and seven children. Then they asked their names and I got stuck!"

"Come along!" Clare laughed, "you do look as if you needed a change."

"Working," explained John, as he stepped into the car after Clare; "someone must work."

"What d'you think of the car? It's Father's and mine. He pays, I drive!"

"Fine car and finer idea! Do you drive much?"

"No." Clare's tone was a little dubious, and a tiny frown settled on her forehead. "Not much, but I'm getting on."

Now the first part of her answer was strictly true—the second open to question, but she'd been so keen to meet John that Dick hadn't objected.

Laugharne is a tiny village nine miles from the station—snuggled on the crook of the hillside.

The road from the station is hilly, and when you bicycle, you walk most of the way because the hills are too steep to ride up and too stony to ride down. Besides, they are always clipping the hedges and you get a thorn in your back tire and puncture it, and that means walking the last lap, which is flat. There is not much traffic, and it is as well, since the roads are too narrow for two vehicles to pass one another in comfort.

Clare had forgotten all these things before she started, but was doubly conscious of them with her passenger by her side, and she was so nervous that the course of the car would have broken a snake's back.

And the pity of it all was that John hardly remembered who was with him. Half his thoughts and all his interest were in Switzerland.

Clare's nervous little laugh roused him. "Near thing," she gasped.

"Very," said John, guessing she had scraped the cart they'd just passed; "like me to drive?"

"No, thank you, we're getting on finely. I'd never hear the end of it from Dick if you drove."

They were going down a gentle slope which developed into a steep hill, leading down into the only village through which they had to pass. The road was bad with cunning twists and turns, and Clare drove carefully, though gathering speed.

Suddenly from the side, where no opening was visible, a cow appeared and stood with madden-

ing irresolution in the middle of the way. Clare sounded the horn and turned the car sharply, and the startled cow gambolled like a lamb. Then Clare lost her head, turned the car again and again to avoid the animal, drove full tilt into the wall, and was thrown. She threw a neat somersault and came down sitting on the grass the other side of the wall. John was less fortunate. He landed on his back, also in the field, but he caught his head an ugly crack on a stone and then lay still. To add to the general discomfort it began to rain—in the hopeless downpour fashion it affects by the sea.

Clare stood up and then ran to John.

"John," she cried, fumbling with his collar, "John, John."

But John didn't answer, and his white, drawn face and closed eyes terrified her.

"John," she wailed, "do wake up."

Help came in the shape of the butcher's cart, and the butcher himself, with greasy hands, lifted John, dragged him to the cart, and drove him home.

Clare followed, scared to death. If John were dead, she had killed him and she would never know another minute's happiness in all her life. What would she say to Jan? What could she say to Dick? What could she do for herself?

In the back room behind the shop she sat quite still—not daring to move. She had wired Dick

to come—and then if John had not stirred, if he were really dead—— She bit her lip; tears filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"There, now, come you!" soothed the butcher's wife, Mrs. Lloyd, "the doctor's with him. He'll come all right in the end—come you!"

Clare sipped her tea gratefully, forgetting that she didn't like the sugar which her hostess had ladled in, in an access of hospitality.

"Thank you!" she said, "I do hope he will."

"He's a fine big fellow—for you," continued Mrs. Lloyd.

"Yes," Clare sighed, "he is, isn't he?"

In the country districts of Wales—and England, too, for all I know to the contrary—a girl has one string to her bow or none. And if a man and maid go out together, there is only one interpretation; namely, that they are courting. Therefore, nothing was more natural than that Mrs. Lloyd should think that John and Clare were sweethearts; otherwise why were they out together? The reasoning was very simple.

And so when the doctor appeared and said that John was conscious, Mrs. Lloyd led the way upstairs to the room where John lay, and bustling in first said in a cheerful voice: "You'll do nicely now, sir, and I'm bringing your sweetheart up to see you."

Clare blushed furiously and advanced into the room.

John stretched out a limp hand from the bed.  
“Darling,” he said, “Jan, darling!”

Clare turned white and her lips trembled.

“Jan’s not here,” she said, softly, “it’s Clare; don’t you remember. I was driving you.”

John let his hand fall. “Clare—yes, of course. Don’t fret, Clare—it’s all right.”

John rested a day or two, and Clare was glad; she, too, needed time to compose herself. For one breathless half second she had thought that John was speaking to her before Jan’s name followed to show unmistakably whom he meant. But supposing he had meant Clare, she knew that she would have—

There are some mistakes at which a merciful Providence allows only one spectator. But Clare herself knew—and that was bad enough.

On the third day John came downstairs; on the fourth, walked to the beach and bathed, and at the end of the week everything except the car was running smoothly again, though Clare avoided John whenever she could without being remarkable. She felt as if he must have guessed what she thought, though she knew he didn’t. Whereas John had been hardly conscious when he spoke, and had quite forgotten what he had said, but he couldn’t help seeing that Clare was shy with him, and put it down to her still feeling rather foolish about the accident.

And so he sought out Clare—to put her at her

ease, and she fought shy of him, and Dick, from his pinnacle of diplomatic superiority, watched and wondered. There was no doubt at all that old John was getting keen.

Taste is indisputable—poems and proverbs and sayings and saws prove it time and again. And on no point is it more indisputable than on the subject of pleasure.

One man risks life and limb in the pursuit of sport; another gives money and health to some literary hobby, while a third tickles his palate with the dainties of asceticism. A woman enjoys herself in the display of a constantly changing wardrobe: her sister is rooting round like a tramp in the oldest clothes she can find.

And though cockling isn't to everyone's taste, those who enjoy it—well, they do enjoy it.

The long stretch of sand at Laugharne is famous for cockling. The tide covers it twice a day, and on the ebb a band of cocklers go forth, with an instrument like a spud, and baskets; and, for the professionals, donkey carts wait to carry the cockles back to town.

Cockling isn't a sport—because the cockles lie hidden snugly in the wet sand, and wait to be found. It is like diamond mining on a small scale.

"I'd enjoy it more," said John, "if I could find a few. Lack of success like this is blighting my young life!"

He was squatting on his haunches, with bare legs, sweater, and shorts. His knees were sandy where he had knelt to delve, and so were his hands.

Clare was digging a little way off. "How many have you got now?" She didn't raise her head, and John could only catch a glimpse of a sunburnt serious face, and small curls blowing about.

"Half a dozen, perhaps, and we've been here about an hour."

"Then what are you grumbling about?" demanded Dick. "I've four, and since cockles cost threepence a pint and I've been grubbing like a pig for an hour, I strike!"

Dick straightened himself and held out the cockles.

"You're a slack brute," John said, dispassionately; "go on man, stick to it—not for glory—but for the sake of the——"

"Are you going home?" Clare cut in.

"Yes," from Dick. "No," from John.

Clare looked from one to the other.

"That settles it, my dear!" Dick picked up his empty bag. "You stay. Our little visitor is happy. Ta-ta—don't overdo it," and he sauntered off—diplomatic again.

"Lazy devil," quoth John. "No, I forgot—let's begin once more. Lazy little fellow—that's the way, isn't it? Who says these blamed cockles aren't cute?"

"I think a little farther on, by the Point, is a

good pitch," Clare suggested, "and when the tide comes in, we can climb up and go home over the hill."

"Good enough—I'm really warming to it now. It isn't as though I hadn't caught any. The fever of cockling is getting into my blood." John turned to her, smiling.

"I've been thinking," said Clare, seriously; "are you sure your head's quite right again?"

"Judging from my conversation you mean?" he asked.

"No, John—you are absurd. Only, you can guess I've been pretty nervous."

"Right as rain—don't worry any more and, anyhow, it wasn't your fault."

They walked in silence for a minute or two and then John spoke again:

"I've had a letter from the farm—you know, the fellows on the farm in Canada. They're mad on my going back there, if only for a bit."

"Yes?" Clare's voice was absolutely level.

"I don't know—I can't make up my mind. I'm just faintly beginning to get on here—but—oh, I don't know—it doesn't matter much."

"I should think it did matter—very much."

"That's only because you're kind. In a way, it's difficult—" He hesitated and stopped.

It was difficult, too, to explain that he didn't care to leave Jan yet. If she were going to play the fool, she needed someone, not to interfere

but to be ready to come forward, supposing she needed it.

For instance, if she quarrelled with Miss Blakeborough, where was she to go, since she hated Brynavon? Clare might take her if Mrs. Goodyer were willing, but it was no use disguising the fact that Jan, even as a visitor, was not an unalloyed pleasure. Still he could ask—if—and in case.

They cockled for some time with rather better success.

"Let's sit on the rocks for a bit. We've done enough work for to-day," John suggested.

"Is there time?" Clare asked. "I promised Father I'd play golf this afternoon."

"Plenty of time—we'll fly home—besides, I want to talk to you. If I want a thing, I can't remember other people, can you? I seem the most important person in all the world."

But after washing in pools and lighting a pipe, John's wish to talk seemed to have evaporated.

"We'll have to get on," Clare broke the silence.

"Wait a minute. Clare, if I go to Canada, you'll write, won't you—often? I'll want to know things about everybody—the kind of things only you'll tell me."

"Yes—I'll answer your letters." Clare gazed straight ahead of her. The tide had turned and was running in round the Point—white sea-gulls stood in lines along the shore, or swept in curves over their heads, uttering loud cries.

Clare wished with all her heart that John had never come, or having come that he would go away now. Oh, yes—better now than later, and how much she hated Jan, who didn't know the value of pearls!

"Clare," he went on, "I want to ask you a most important question—a great favour. It will mean an awful lot to me."

John knocked the ashes out of his pipe, though he had only lighted it a few minutes ago. The old feeling of his boyhood was assailing him—the overwhelming distaste of speaking of himself. But it was safer in case of accidents. Jan needed to be guarded against herself, and if he told Clare exactly how matters stood, she would help, as a friend of Jan's and his.

Clare sat quite still—waiting, with her heart thumping like a hammer against her side. Then she had been mistaken and John, after all, did care.

"Please go on, John," she said, "I want to hear."

John leant forward, and toward her—

"I want to ask you, Clare, if you'd be willing to—"

"At last!" broke in a voice, "I've hunted for you everywhere. John, here's a telegram, and there's too much exercise on this holiday." Dick scrambled down the rocks toward them with the flimsy brown envelope in his hand,

"Go on, John," cried Clare, "quick!"

There are more ways of telling than by word of mouth, and Clare's eyes told John what nothing would have made her say.

"Jan," said John, quietly, "if you'd help me with her."

"Yes," said Clare. It was the answer she had meant to give, though not to this question.

"What a way you've come," Dick grumbled, holding out the telegram.

John tore it open and read, gazing at it for a minute or two.

"Any luck, Clare?" asked her brother.

"No," she answered, decisively, "my luck's out this morning."

"I must go back to town at once. When's there a train?" John was alert and very much awake—all his dreaminess and fun had fallen from him.

"You can catch the mail to-night," Clare said. "Come to lunch now—we can still get round the Point."

John explained to his host and hostess that he was recalled on business, but after lunch he sent off a telegram:

BLAKEBOROUGH.

Coming at once.

JOHN.

Later he went to the post office again and sent another—this time to "Waring"—and then he

played a round of golf with Mr. Goodyer, because Clare had a headache.

"She's not very strong," said her father, "that little accident upset her more than we know."

Dick saw John off. "Come back if you can," he pressed.

"Rather," said John. "It's a top-hole little place."

"Poor old John," he said at supper; "he didn't want to go a bit. I asked him to come back again."

Mrs. Goodyer had brought up her children carefully, especially Clare, and reticence, a maidenly reserve, and pleasant manners, had formed a large part of the educational course. But human nature triumphs over art, and Clare was sore.

"I think, Dick," she said, "that it's a pity you weren't drowned at birth—like kittens."

"Clare!" reproved her mother.

"What's up now?" said Dick; "there's no understanding a girl! I thought you'd like it."

"There's no plumbing the depths of idiocy in a man," was his sister's retort as she left the room.

They soon made it up, but Dick never could understand why Clare wouldn't walk toward the Point, considering it is the best walk in Laugharne.

## CHAPTER XV

JAN sat up in bed, suddenly wide awake. Seven o'clock, her watch told her, and it seemed only a few minutes since she had said good-night to Ronnie and come upstairs to bed.

But it was the most disgraceful waste of time to sleep at all, considering what the days held in store for her.

Walks with Ronald—talks with him—climbs—games—meals—all with Ronald. It was only three weeks since he had surprised her on the rock and since Miss Blakeborough had introduced him to her. Three weeks of bliss—a foretaste of heaven. Jan couldn't think how she had lived before—all her life seemed a prelude, and her acquaintance with Ronnie the melody. True, the melody was in syncopated time and the harmony not always all it should be. Even in the three weeks there has been quarrels—short, but very acrimonious.

That time, for instance, when Jan had spoken of John.

"Who's John?" Ronald said, speaking with his mouth full. He was so advanced and free from

custom that he often dispensed with ordinary manners and trifles of that sort.

"He's my cousin; he's most awfully clever. You must know him: he writes and calls himself 'Owen John,'" Jan answered, proudly.

"Oh, that bounder!" said Ronald.

Jan stiffened at the epithet so inapplicable to John, but she was learning very quickly that Ronnie didn't care for arguments, unless he were the protagonist.

"I believe I have seen some of his stuff. Pretty putrid," he said, loftily.

"Did you think so? I like it most awfully, and if you don't, you're in the minority," Jan replied with some heat.

Ronnie smiled with superiority. "Yes? I often am. I find the best brains—the free minds—the clearer vision among the few who matter."

"The few who don't like John's work don't matter."

Jan was final and annoyed. John was a thing of the past; she didn't care two pence about him; she tried never to think of him, but he was her property all the same, and she wasn't going to allow Ronnie or any one else to run him down.

Ronnie tried to argue and Jan lost her temper and there was a scene.

Then there was the time he had jeered at her for being Welsh. It had only been a silly joke—"Taffy was a Welshman" sort of style. But Jan's

face had turned white—then flushed to the leaden colour of an ugly bruise—and in a rasping voice she had told him what she thought of him and the people like him. Even now she didn't like to think of what she had said that day, and—good luck—she couldn't remember it all. Ronnie had been as furious as she had—but neither could keep up a quarrel which separated them. They couldn't get on without each other.

The clock struck the quarter, and Jan sprang out of bed, and flung open the window. Then she dressed quickly, because she was going to meet Ronnie for a walk before breakfast, and they had arranged to be at the church at a quarter to eight and he didn't care to be kept waiting.

She slipped into her bag some chocolate and biscuits and opening the door quietly, crept along the corridor and downstairs, with a delightful air of conspiracy.

The morning walk had been arranged, because people in the hotel were beginning to talk. They looked, or looked away, or sniffed, according to their interest or lack of breeding; and, to be just to them, Jan did give them a topic of conversation. She flaunted Ronnie and herself in front of them with a proud disregard of the conventions that she could not resist. And even Miss Blakeborough was getting fidgety.

Jan hurried along: she didn't care what these people thought or said. Thank goodness! she

was free and could do as she liked. Of course, with John——

Somehow John had an inconvenient way of cropping up in her thoughts just now, perhaps because he was the antithesis of Ronnie in every way, even down or up to keeping his hands clean.

Jan sat on the wall by the church and waited. Ronnie was always late for appointments and this morning was no exception. She stifled the thought that in the old days it had been John who waited, John who arranged so that expeditions were made in comfort, John who fetched and carried, who remembered everything; and Jan who sailed in at the last minute and accepted all the good things as her due.

Jan looked at her watch, impatiently. Ten past eight now. If Ronnie did not come soon, they would have no time at all, because they must be back for breakfast at nine-thirty. The thought of food reminded her of the biscuits. She opened the bag and was dividing them into two piles when Ronnie appeared, looking as though he had slept in his clothes or had not had time to wash.

"Sorry I'm late—I hardly slept at all," and Ronnie yawned with a fine display of teeth discoloured by smoking.

He said the same thing every morning, and Jan allowed herself the privilege of doubting his veracity.

"I brought some biscuits—there are yours."

"Ta." Ronnie stretched out his hand and took a couple. His nails did need to be cleaned, and his first and second fingers were yellow with cigarette juice.

"Isn't it grand!" He waved an arm to comprehend the view and knocked down a biscuit. Jan picked it up and fought down the feeling of irrational annoyance which Ronnie often aroused in her.

"Yes, it's pretty good," she admitted, slowly.

"And think of all those fools lying down there in bed—their minds blank—their heads solid ivory from the teeth upward—their outlooks narrow as the grave."

Jan shifted. "Miss Blakeborough's there, and she's not anything like what you've said, and I can't think why you always want to run people down. Leave them alone. They don't interfere with you."

Ronnie took one of Jan's biscuits. "I hate them and all they stand for."

"That's my biscuit," Jan interrupted.

"Communism—share and share alike—yours is mine," he murmured.

"Then yours is mine and I'm hungry. So we might as well keep our own. I divided equally—I hate messing food."

"You're always the same," he grumbled. "Your mind is fettered by tiny bonds. You're a Philistine, my dear girl. I thank my God I'm free."

"But are you? I'm not so sure," she said, angrily.

Ronnie turned on her, fiercely. "I can go straight ahead to the goal of Freedom. I am unhampered by convention, and as-dry-as-dust principles. I have thrown aside the empty creeds and foolish beliefs which weigh you down. I go forward with faith into the light—to the dawn of the new era—to the glorious day." He turned to her, his face distorted with temper, challenging her.

"All the same I'm not sure," Jan answered sullenly. "It's mostly words—you don't do things, you talk."

"Jan!" His voice was so reproachful it might have been Aunt Annie speaking. He was really angry now, his eyes were flashing with something like passion, and his sallow face was flushed. Jan had never seen him so good-looking.

"Do you know, Ronnie, it suits you most awfully well to look like that. Do keep it up," and she chuckled. It was nothing more than an amused schoolgirl giggle.

Ronnie slipped down from the wall, tearing the left sleeve of his coat as he did so.

"I'm mistaken in you," he cried in a hoarse, cracked voice. "I thought—I thought—" He broke off. "Nothing will be served by fruitless discussion. I go. Good-bye."

"Does he know there's a crumb on his chin?"

thought Jan, but she didn't risk telling him. "I'm sorry you're so angry," she said, demurely, "but good-bye."

Ronnie gazed at her in amazed silence for a second or two, looking like a third-rate touring company hero saying "Farewell!" Then he came toward her.

"Jan," he cried, "I can't live without you. You torment me day and night"—(he yawned in proof)—"Jan, I do want you."

Jan was silent: of course she had known he wouldn't go. He was always saying good-bye and coming back again. But suppose he really did go—would she mind? Of course she would; she only played with him because she was so sure of him; she forgot that probably he, too, was sure of her.

"Jan!" he cried again, "you're very cold and I love you, darling, more than all the world—ever-more, Jan."

When John proposed to her, he had held out the ring, and stammered: "Anything doing, darling?" He hadn't mentioned love, taking for granted that Jan knew. Ronnie left nothing to the imagination. When Jan did not speak, he stood before her pouring out impassioned pleas, and ended by falling on his knees and kissing her shoe. Some of the black polish came off on to his mouth.

But Jan was first moved and finally carried away. She had a sense of power at the sight of a

man abject before her. The sunshine and colour and the stately snow-capped mountains in the far distance rearing their heads on high till they reached the clouds, all contributed their quota to the romance of the situation.

Jan jumped off the wall, and laid a hand on Ronnie's shoulder.

"All right, little man," she said, very gently, "don't worry. I'll marry you."

Ronnie leapt to his feet and flung his arms round her. He did his love-making so well that a biased observer, such as John, for instance, might have said he had rehearsed it until he was action perfect.

Then he led her to the wall again, and they sat wrapt in discussion and forgetting the time.

Ronnie had his work cut out before him. He managed to convey to Jan, at last, that though he loved her to distraction—desperation—nay, even to despair—he did not want to marry her. He did not believe in marriage—it was a degrading custom—a desecration by the State of the highest and holiest—and the ring a symbol of the woman's servitude. But he loved her—he rather harped on this point—yes, he loved her more than ever man loved a woman—he was hers to the death—aye, and beyond.

Couldn't she, wouldn't she trust him? Their union would be one of perfect happiness, unsullied by the sordid hand of law; their love would be

free; they together side by side would strike a blow for the glorious liberty of thought and action.

The prospect was alluring; the freedom, the liberty, the lust for destruction of law fired her imagination. They wouldn't be like other people; what they were doing was for an example. Society would receive them; and if Society didn't, then Jan would be a splendid martyr, a type of wonderful womanhood—an apostle of liberty.

"Will you come away with me, Jan?" he asked for the dozenth time.

After long discussion, she fenced with a "When?"

"To-day—we'll seize the horns of opportunity—we'll fly together on the wings of poetry," Ronnie answered.

"Let's talk sense," Jan said, soberly.

Ronnie came to earth; it appeared he had planned everything.

"The 1:20 train," he said. "Leave it all to me."

"I'd rather know," Jan said.

Ronnie had missed trains before now, but she didn't remind him.

"It's a single-line railway, and the train comes in at one and leaves 1:20. You catch that, and bring as little luggage as possible so as not to attract attention, and I'll join you at the first station down the line."

A shadow crossed Jan's face. "Ronnie," she

demanded, "if you're not ashamed of what we are doing, and I'm not if I come, why all this secrecy? Let's go off bravely together."

Besides, though Jan didn't say it, if Ronnie missed the train, and she ran away alone, she'd look such an awful fool.

"It is better that we go quietly," Ronnie answered. "There would be trouble if we told people—they would try to stop us; they would seek to persuade you. Come, darling, and to-morrow we'll tell the world our magnificent secret. Come."

He bent toward her, his burning, mesmeric eyes fixed on her face.

"I'll come," said Jan. "Oh, goodness! It's half-past nine now, we must fly."

But the church was the best part of half-an-hour's walk, and Ronnie was flabby.

"Till this afternoon," he whispered, pantingly, as he pressed her hand in the hall, "and then——"

The dining-room door opened and Miss Blakeborough came out.

"Jan," she said, slipping her hand through the girl's arm, "I have ordered breakfast for you in your room."

Jan allowed herself to be led away. Miss Blakeborough's quietness didn't deceive her. The Head was angry, with a fierce white anger, and Jan was in for it.

She followed Jan into the room and taking the tray from the waiter, closed the door. The sight

of Jan's sullen set face made her change her tactics.

"Eat your breakfast, old girl," she began.

"Why here?" demanded Jan. "Why not in the dining-room, as usual?"

"Because, if you want the truth, I dislike your making yourself conspicuous with Mr. Waring. A hotel is a hotbed of scandal, and rightly or wrongly one has to consider public opinion!"

"Why?" Jan shot out her question with insolent calm.

"There's no use in discussing the whys and wherefores of convention, and I for one don't care to do it with you. But while you are under my care, I don't wish you to behave so—so absurdly. See Mr. Waring, by all means, if you want to—openly and above board—but don't steal out for early-morning walks and moonlight rambles. It isn't done, dear, honestly not!"

"There is such a thing as opportunity," flashed Jan, and half-regretted the insult a minute later.

"Quite so," Miss Blakeborough agreed. "But there's a difference between taking and making it. Do be reasonable, Jan, dear."

"I must be free to do as I like," Jan answered. "You want to hamper me at every turn. I want to go my own way."

"But that's impossible!" The Head could feel her temper rising. "At present you are under my care, and I am responsible for you, and unless you can undertake to do as I wish, I propose to go

straight home, and hand you over to your guardian."

Jan laughed a mirthless, melodramatic laugh! The Head could go home when she liked—but Jan wouldn't go with her; she'd be free—free. She felt a little superior pity for the Head, whose life had been spent within the narrow confines of respectable convention.

"Will you give me that undertaking, Jan?" The Head was pale, but two patches of colour glowed on either cheek.

"No," drawled Jan, "I won't. That's a fact for you."

The Head moved to the door. "Then you'll stay here, and we leave to-morrow." A moment later Jan heard the key turn in the lock.

She flew to the door and shook it, and in a childish passion, kicked the panels.

"Beast!" she panted—"beast; I will get out."

Miss Blakeborough went slowly downstairs and gave Jan's key in at the office.

John would be here to-morrow, thank goodness! He'd come at once when he got her telegram.

Was she really, as Jan hinted, a sour-tempered elderly spoil-sport? She wanted Jan to have all the freedom possible, to enjoy every moment of life, but she daren't allow the girl to become the talk of the place. Somehow rumours hung round Waring's name, and there was nothing definite—hints, surprised looks, and raised eyebrows.

Men didn't like him, Miss Blakeborough noticed. They called him a "bounder" and an "outsider." There had been trouble about a bill, some trifling unpleasantness about cards; nothing—only enough to make Miss Blakeborough anxious.

In the hall she met Ronald face to face.

"Is Jan about anywhere, Miss Blakeborough?" he asked.

"Jan is in her room. She doesn't feel disposed to go out again to-day," the Head answered, frigidly. "I don't approve of early-morning meetings, Mr. Waring. I'll be quite frank with you. I like everything above board."

Ronnie's air of penitence was excellent. "I'm so sorry, Miss Blakeborough, but Jan does love a walk."

The Head took no trouble to hide her contempt and moved away.

"Cad!" she said, fiercely, under her breath. "Oh, I wish we were going to-day."

Now Ronnie was no fool, and Jan's "indisposition" did not hold water, so when Miss Blakeborough had passed through the door on to the terrace, Ronnie sauntered up to the office.

"May I have my key, please?" he asked with his special lady-killer smile. The young lady clerk was listening to the telephone and merely smiled and nodded.

"I'll take it," said Ronnie, and, with great skill, took Jan's as well—just to be sure.

"Thanks awfully," he said, "you're always good to me, aren't you?"

The lady clerk smiled.

"Very well, sir," she shouted down the 'phone—"a room to-night. Name, sir? Owen—thank you."

Ronnie's eyes glittered with malicious glee. Owen!—perhaps it was one of Jan's crowd; perhaps—oh, joy!—it was the precious cousin and he'd come to-night—the train got in at 6 o'clock—and he'd find the bird flown.

Ronnie smuggled the key to Jan, who received it with a staccato yelp of pleasure. The only aim in her mind now was to baulk Miss Blakeborough. Ronnie and his love and the fight for freedom had faded. The Head, gazing at the empty room, was the one picture Jan could see; and, sometimes, in spite of her furious temper, that picture was dimmed by a mist of tears.

"You won't fail?" whispered Ronnie. He had pushed the key under the door.

"No fear," was Jan's answer.

The morning flew by, while Jan tramped the bedroom to and fro. It had been so easy to say "yes" on the mountain-side with Ronnie close by her: it was so difficult to go forward alone, even to that future of liberty and freedom. She wished there was someone in the secret—Sarah or John had been her confidant in previous escapades. But perhaps they wouldn't understand now.

Twelve; a quarter past; half past; a quarter to one. The chimes of the clock sounded like blows on an anvil—each blow sealing her down.

“Now or never,” Jan deliberated.

“Now,” she decided, and thrusting her purse into her pocket and one or two photographs into her handbag, she opened the door and stepped into the corridor, slipped down a back staircase, and the next minute was running along the road to the station at full speed.

She took a ticket to the next station only—after that, Ronnie must decide—she was in his care, then—forever.

She was so engrossed in her own thoughts, so nervous and abstracted, that she failed to notice a tall man who had stepped off the train and was watching her with curious intentness.

“God!” said John Owen, stepping back against the wall, “she’s not—surely—she’s not——”

He did not formulate his fears; he knew at once, as well as if he’d been a party to the arrangement, where Jan was going.

There was a furtiveness about her—a look on her face which was unmistakable. That and the figure he had seen on the platform a station or two down the line—a long-haired, untidy, loose-boned man—gave John his clue.

Jan hurried the length of the train and had just settled down in the far corner away from the platform when John sauntered up.

"Hallo!" he cried. "I thought it was you."

Jan did not faint nor go into hysterics, but she would have liked to have done both. It would have been an easy way out.

"Hallo!" she answered; "this is a surprise!"

"Where are you off to? I can't have you running away like this my first day." John thought if he could stop her going to-day they would be able to fix up something to-morrow.

But the time was so short, it was one-fifteen now.

"Sorry, John." Jan's voice wasn't steady. "You ought to have let me know you were coming."

"And would that have made a difference?" he asked.

Jan shook her head: they always understood one another, these two. Old John knew all right—she saw that at a glance.

"No—nothing could have made a difference," she answered.

"Jan, come out at once, darling. Don't you see—don't you realize what you're doing? It's irrevocable—Jan, he's not worth it."

The whistle blew.

"No," said Jan.

"Jan," he urged, "come out—come out."

"Good-bye," Jan cried. "Oh, John, good-bye," but John's answer was to jump into the slowly moving train and sit down opposite her.

Jan knew then she was beaten; three people cannot elope together; it's too absurd, and ridicule can kill even romance.

Ronnie saw it, too, in a flash. He did not cut a heroic figure at the sight of John, and when the train left the station it bore Ronnie away alone. Jan stayed behind with her cousin.

John's explanation to Miss Blakeborough was incoherent, and Jan was not helpful. As far as the Head could gather, John had fetched Jan to go to the station to see Mr. Waring off and they'd then taken a walk.

Jan listened in silence while John talked at dinner. He was very big and strong and clean, and why hadn't Ronnie put up some sort of fight for her if he loved her so?—not *if*, but *since* he loved her so!

That evening two things happened which Jan never forgot. The first was that the proprietor came to speak to them as they sat in the lounge.

"Did Mademoiselle know ze address of Monsieur Waring? Monsieur 'ad gone but 'e 'ad not settle 'is bill."

Jan tried hard to believe that it was forgetfulness—and failed. At that minute a stout blonde lady tapped John on the arm. "Introduce your cousin to me," she said.

John stood up. "Jan," he said, "may I introduce you to Mrs. Ronald Waring?"

Jan went to bed early but she did not sleep.

If she had gone away with Ronnie, she would not have been free, but hobbled all her life. Ronnie had deceived her—John had saved her; but though she might in time pardon Ronnie, she could never forgive John.

## CHAPTER XVI

**T**HANK you, Emily, that will do; you needn't wait. Oh, Emily," Mrs. Owen raised her voice as the maid moved to the door, "you've forgotten the water. Always pour out the water before you go."

"Yes, mum."

"And take both hands to that jug. I've told you time and again the handle is cracked. There, thank you."

"Yes, mum."

Henry cut and recut his mutton into the small dice which he trusted were most easily digested, and ate in silence.

"I met Mrs. Griffiths downtown this morning," his wife's voice ran on. "I popped into market for a few minutes, and as I was coming out there she was."

Henry made sufficient sound to enable Annie to deduce that he was attending.

"Very big she is getting, poor thing. It must be hard for her to go about now with that size. And Willie's face is better and they are off to Laugharne to-morrow. He's had a nasty boil on his cheek."

Henry pushed back his plate. He was squeamish about food and Annie was exact in descriptions of ailments.

"Doctor Harris lanced it——"

Henry felt he must stop her.

"Jan is home again," he announced by way of diversion. "I've seen her."

Willie's face was forgotten instantly, thank goodness, while Mrs. Owen held her fork poised half-way to her open mouth.

"Jan? Never, Henry! When did she come?"

"Yesterday!"

"Did you ask about John?"

If Henry had ever despised his wife, he would have done so now, but instead he announced, quite sharply for him: "Certainly not—you heard from John this morning. You know he sailed yesterday. There's nothing more to know."

"Yes, of course, dear—only I thought perhaps——" Annie's tone was deprecating.

"He's so often talked about going back to Canada, the only wonder is he hasn't done so before. Shall I ring?" Henry dismissed the subject.

"Please, dear!"

While Emily removed the plates, Annie was busy thinking how she could manage to run up to Pentre that afternoon. She would ask if Mrs. Jones could spare her a little more butter this week, and it would be only right to see Jan. And it was a curious thing, but somehow John did seem

to think a lot of that girl, though, of course, everything was over between them, and there was nothing in it. Still John had been to Switzerland. Yes, and Emily was too busy, so she'd go herself to Pentre.

"Why on earth ask that girl about John?" thought Henry. "Of course, she knows if any one does. I'm sick to death of roast mutton, and why on earth can't Alice serve something besides rice? If Jan's playing with John—— That board meeting finishes before four."

"Rice, dear?"

"A little, please."

"I always think there's nothing like a nice rice pudding."

"Nothing," agreed Henry, gravely, with inward appreciation of the truthfulness of Lewis Carrol.

Henry's invariable habit was to read the paper after lunch while Annie rested in her chair—"just forty winks, you know"—and about three o'clock he'd say: "Well, good-bye, now, I must be going, Annie," and she'd open her eyes.

"Will you be in to tea at five, dear?"

But to-day Henry made his usual remark immediately after lunch, and when Annie had brushed him and seen him off, she went straight upstairs and put on her outdoor things.

"Bring me that little basket, Emily. I'm going up to see Mrs. Jones of Pentre, and if she can spare me some butter——"

"She knows well enough Mrs. Jones won't give 'er more. It's Miss Owen she's after," said Emily to Alice the cook.

"And they are telling that Miss Owen won't look at Mr. John," Alice replied.

It was a hot afternoon and the roads were dusty. Still Annie plodded on—probably John had sent some message by Jan, she told herself, knowing it to be untrue, and she'd like to hear it before she went to the Wells on Monday. All the really best people waited till September, so it was such a good thing that the rooms she and Henry always took were engaged for August. And she wouldn't tell Henry she had been here: it would be a pity to vex him.

The half-wit Harold opened the door, and stood staring at Mrs. Owen with a loose-hanging jaw.

"Is Mrs. Jones in?" Annie inquired in her best Parade manner.

Harold retired round the door and his place was taken by a stout farm girl who clattered in clogs across the stone floor.

"Mrs. Jones," repeated Annie, "or—Miss Owen?"

The girl clattered back again. "Mis O-wen," she called, "Miss O-wen—you're wanted." Then with a sudden remembrance of manners: "Will you please to come in, mum?"

Annie sat in the spotless kitchen and admired the old oak dresser with its abundance of willow-

pattern and lustre, and a minute later Jan appeared, her frock covered by a large white pinafore, her face very pale, with big hollows under her eyes, and every inch of her alive and quivering.

"Hallo, Aunt Annie," she cried. "Of course you've heard—isn't it lovely?"

"I don't know what you mean, Jan," Annie answered, soberly, though she was afraid; she didn't approve of patched-up engagements, and Jan was difficult. Still, she wanted John's happiness—

"Why, Sarah's baby, of course—it's a girl—and it's to be called Sarah Jan—at least I say so. It had just come by the time I'd arrived. Wasn't it too sweet of Sarah? If you like I'll run up and see whether she may have visitors."

"Let her come up if she likes," said Sarah, wearily. It was such a wonderful thing to have a baby to be proud of that she had no wish to flaunt her happiness. She wanted it all to herself, to hug it to her in amazed delight. "But let her come up if she wants to," she repeated.

"Sarah will be very pleased to see you," was Jan's version, "only we mustn't stay long nor tire her."

Mrs. Owen tiptoed into the room with more noise than if she had walked ordinarily.

"Well, Sarah," she said, in a piercing whisper, "this is a surprise."

Sarah smiled, "Please to sit down," Mrs.

Owen," she said, and suddenly she was so proud. Her voice trembled and her work-scarred fingers drummed nervously on the patchwork counterpane.

Sarah Jan Jones had been born in holy wedlock with Mrs. Hughes, now corpulent and having forgotten old scores, in attendance. If that wasn't enough, Miss Jan had arrived home suddenly, and had hardly let the baby out of her arms all day; and then the Mayor's wife was the first visitor. Annie was given her full status in Sarah's mind for this occasion. Oh, Sarah Jan was all right; she was starting fair.

"I'm in charge," said Jan, picking up the bundle of clothes from beside Sarah. "Mrs. Hughes is resting. Now, zen, Sarah Jan lovins—look at me, sweetness. Isn't she the image of me, Aunt Annie, bless her."

The baby's eyes were closed, its little face red and mottled, and there was a mouse-coloured down on its tiny, soft head which Jan held against her cheek.

"If she's as good as you, Miss Jan——" began Sarah.

"She'll be a hundred times better, the beautifuls, won't you, Sarah Jan?"

"It's too soon to say yet," said Annie, "but I hope——"

Jan laid the baby down. "Sarah's tired," she interrupted. "Mrs. Hughes will be back in a few

minutes, I expect, so let's go downstairs and have tea."

Aunt Annie said afterward that she had never heard Jan talk so much before. All during tea she chattered about Sarah and the baby and Miss Blakeborough and Switzerland. "Oh, and John came home with us. He is a rolling stone. Another cup, Aunt Annie, and a paneake? And the first morning in London when I said to Miss Blakeborough: 'I must say good-bye to John,' 'He's gone,' she said: 'didn't you know? He's left for Liverpool and sails for Canada to-morrow.'"

Jan's volubility should have put Aunt Annie on her guard; the truthfulness of her statement would not have deceived Henry, for instance. He would have known that there was something underneath it.

Yet it was true, as far as it went. All through that long journey down to Basle, and thence to Boulogne, Jan had sat still in the corner of the carriage staring out in the darkness and thinking, thinking, thinking. She could see clearly now the awful danger she had escaped. Ronnie had played with her round the mouth of a bottomless pit, and it wasn't her fault she wasn't engulfed. The Head was angry, and bringing her home in disgrace, and John ought to say something. He hadn't spoken a word to her all the way. Jan hadn't given him the chance. The train tore through the darkness and hour by hour the girl

had sat pale and wide-eyed. What an awful hash she had made! Other people didn't find things so difficult. She had burnt her boats this time; the Head would never forgive this. What about those two watching her from "the other side?" They'd be pretty sick; and why didn't John speak to her?

Then someone touched her, and Jan turned to find Miss Blakeborough standing beside her.

"Cheer up, darling," she whispered, sitting down and putting an arm round Jan; "it will be dawn soon."

"You've had heaps and millions of opportunities with men," came in a muffled tone from Jan. She was making reparation as best she could.

The Head smiled in the darkness; it was a typical apology.

"Try and sleep now," she said, "lean against me."

"I meant to go away with Ronnie," said Jan. "Oh, how I hate John!"

The Head could feel Jan's tense body vibrating, but she didn't speak.

"I'm so thankful!" went on Jan, "it would have been awful—I didn't know—but John! Oh, I do hate John!"

"You didn't hate John when he came to you in trouble at school, when you were a little girl," whispered the Head, "it's just the same now."

Jan shook her head.

"John liked me then! No, it's all different now," she persisted.

"Perhaps you are, but John's not. John wouldn't change, whatever happened."

Jan pondered over this for the rest of the night, one hand clasping Miss Blakeborough's.

If John had come in now it would have saved a lot of trouble, but he was in a smoker, two doors up, fast asleep.

About seven o'clock he woke and tiptoed along the corridor. Miss Blakeborough was dozing and Jan sat so still he thought she was sleeping. Then the train stopped and John leapt out for some coffee, and because he was slow he got into the back part of the train, and found too late that the front part only ran to Boulogne—the back part to Calais. He wired Miss Blakeborough to Boulogne, but Jan, who had screwed up her courage to determine to speak to him, thought he was avoiding her. And then John's train had been late, and when he did arrive in London, Jan was in bed.

"Did she leave a message for me?" he asked Miss Blakeborough the first thing.

"She's expecting to see you," the Head prevaricated.

John's face relaxed into a slow smile. "Not much of a liar yet, are you?" he said.

He stood for a minute or two, thinking hard. "I know," he said, suddenly, "there's a boat to-

morrow—please tell her I've gone. She knows my address, and thanks most awfully."

Miss Blakeborough nearly wept with the pain John's handshake gave her, and when he had gone, she did weep, worn out with anxiety and relief. And to crown it all, Jan appeared with huge, moony eyes surrounded by deep shadows. "I want to speak to John, please," and Miss Blakeborough had to tell her John had gone.

So you see, Jan's account to her aunt was strictly truthful, only abridged, and when Jan came home, baulked and sore, and found a baby, she made for it and poured out love as if it were water. It is comforting to remember that everyone has been a baby once, and that we have all had our day in evoking quantities of very precious love.

"We're going away on Tuesday, but if you can come down—do," said Aunt Annie as she rose to go.

"I won't leave Sarah, thank you, but I'll be here when you come back. I don't go up to Cambridge till October. Why, here's Uncle Henry."

Mr. Owen turned into the farmyard, and if he was pleased to see his wife, his face belied him. But he was astute—Jan had to admit there were no flies on Uncle Henry.

"I guessed you'd be here, Annie, to see the baby." He'd met David Jones and heard of Sarah Jan for the first time five minutes ago. "So I thought I'd come and fetch you."

"Hownice of you, dear," Annie cooed, nervously.  
"I'm just coming. Good-bye, Jan."

"Jan knows nothing of John," said Annie, when they were out of earshot. "He never even told her he was going."

"Umph!" grunted her husband. That confirmed his fears; so John was still waiting for her.

Jan tried hard to live these days without thinking. She spent most of the time in Sarah's room, nursing Sarah Jan as much as was allowed. She used to sit for hours on a low chair in front of the fire, with the babe lying across her lap, and it was then that she came nearest to peace. But John haunted her—sleeping and awake. She found that he was the standard by which she judged other men, and although she didn't know it, no one came up to his level.

She didn't want him, she told herself, but she did want him to want her. And, anyhow, why hadn't he spoken? If only—

When the baby was three weeks old, Jan had a surprise visit. Clare, Dick, Mona McEvoy, and Willie Griffiths descended on her one morning in a car and stayed to lunch. For when Clare found she was following the wrong trail as far as John was concerned, she wired for Mona McEvoy and made eyes at Willie Griffiths. And very sensible, too, for when milk is spilt the only thing to do is to get some more.

"Mr. Griffiths is teaching me Welsh," said Clare, "only I'm *so* stupid, I'll never learn."

"I think you're most awfully good at it," Willie answered, smiling fatuously.

"Say something," said Jan.

Clare first demurred and then mouthed out a string of unintelligible jargon.

"Jolly good, isn't it?" said Willie.

"Rather!" said Jan. "What's it meant to be?" but only Dick and Mona saw the joke.

Mona's method of appreciation was to laugh almost incessantly at everything that was said to her. Diek's lightest words were treated as gems of wit, and even Willie's efforts received all the encouragement he could reasonably expect.

"They're not like this with me," thought Jan, watching Clare pretend to be helpless, and listening to Mona's high giggle; "and the boys like them all the more for it. What on earth would John think of me?" (Tut, tut, my dear, he doesn't think of you at all—in fact, the number of people who do ever think of you is very small!)

"For the second time, Jan," Clare said in a clear, distinct voice, "will you come down next week-end? It ought to be pretty good fun. Will you still be there?" she asked, turning to Willie, with elaborate carelessness.

"I will," announced Willie, like a man at the wedding service.

"Rather, thanks awfully," said Jan. "I'd like

to—Sarah will be all right by then. Oh, would you like to see Sarah Jan?"

No one was enthusiastic except Jan herself, but she fetched the baby, and showed it off proudly.

"Isn't it too lovely?" she asked. "Aren't you too beautiful—my wee?"

Dick and Willie were openly bored, Clare and Mona secretly so, because Jan seemed to forget them and talked baby nonsense, and the child wasn't even awake. But Jan had to have someone to love, and these four paired off so comfortably without her.

"You can't ever bet on Jan," was Dick's verdict on the way back to Laugharne. "I'd have sworn she wouldn't have touched a kid with a barge-pole and there she was—soppy."

Willie stood up for her. "She's always been like that—only with dogs before. She'd talk by the hour to an old poodle, Dio, they had down at the 'Plas.'"

Clare had no intention of listening to Willie talk on any subject but herself, and at this point she claimed his attention and Dick devoted his to Mona, so everybody was happy.

That night Mrs. Hughes left and David Jones came home drunk for the first time for years. He wasn't violent, only stupid, and Jan tried to pretend not to notice. But it was a bitter humiliation for Sarah, and the next morning she was very poorly, though Jan couldn't persuade her to stay in bed.

"If you're not better, Sarah"—Jan was nursing the baby by the fire—"I shan't go to-morrow, so make up your mind to it."

Sarah looked at her for a minute.

"Miss Jan," she said in a voice that went up and down, "come here—close to me—girl fach. You must go. I'll get him straight again by myself. I can't bear you should see him like that—and the baby—tell me you'll go."

"I'll go," Jan promised.

But she didn't, after all, because that evening Sarah Jan was restless and hot, and Sarah became frightened when no soothing could hush the little wail.

"I'll fetch Doctor Harris," said Jan.

"It's raining," said Sarah, "and Davy's not back yet."

"I'll go," said Jan; "I'll take the bicycle—I won't be long. Don't be frightened, Sarah, she'll be all right. Babies are often ill."

When Doctor Harris arrived the baby was lying still and Sarah made a motion to hurry him, and fainted.

Jan sprang forward and snatched the child, and Doctor Harris laid Sarah on the couch.

But when he came to look, Sarah Jan's little life had flickered out, and she lay in Jan's arms with the wonderful dignity which belongs to death.

Sarah read it in their faces as soon as she opened her eyes.

"She's gone," she said, but there was no question in her tone—only assertion.

"Sarah, dear!" Affection was the only sympathy Jan dared to give. "Dear, dear Sarah."

"It made me very happy," Sarah mused; "it's a grand thing to be married and to be a mother. Give her to me, Miss Jan."

The tears ran down Jan's cheeks as she handed the tiny still form to its mother, but Sarah's eyes were bright and dry.

"I'd have made things here all right again before she grew to notice, wouldn't I, Miss Jan?" she cried, suddenly.

Jan heard the door open and uneven footsteps cross the kitchen floor and she knew of what Sarah was thinking.

"Of course you would, Sarah—quite, quite right. You're wonderful, dear, you always have been wonderful."

Then Sarah broke down. "Oh, Miss Jan," she sobbed, "I couldn't bear it alone; I'm so glad you're free to be with me."

Jan's prayers that night were short but pithy. "Thank God I'm free," she said over and over again.

Then she rose from her knees, and, opening a drawer, took out an old photograph.

"And thank you, John," she said, bowing a belated acknowledgment to her cousin's smiling eyes.

## CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS Jan's twenty-first birthday and a fine morning in November, and she snuggled down into the pillows, listening to the footsteps in the next room with the exquisite pleasure of knowing that she needn't get up yet.

She had come down from Girton in June, with a poor second in the Classical Tripos to her credit, and now she was sharing a flat in town—Camden Town incidentally—with Clare Goodyer and Mona.

Mona was teaching in a L.C.C. Secondary School, hence the noise in the next room, for the young idea shoots early in the day. Clare was attending a Domestic Economy Course at King's College, for no very definite reason except to live in London, and Jan was working in a government office because she didn't know what to do while she waited. She would have been put to it to explain what she was waiting for, and would have been angry at the question, and trailed the red herring of "duty to the country" across the path.

The advertisement had said, "Women Clerks urgently required for Government Departments," and Jan had applied and been interviewed by a man who looked at her, and by a woman who

asked questions and talked of a "narrow path to hoe." She explained that she meant the monotony of the work, and when Jan had been in the office a short time she agreed with her, only she thought the description euphemistic.

She was impressed the first morning because Mr. Perks, the head of the room, said he was glad she had come and she would be a great asset, and they were up to their eyes in work, and perhaps she would like to come back about two o'clock and by that time he'd have found her something to do.

He drifted in from lunch soon after three, and seemed surprised to see her, and told off the boy clerk, Simmons, to show her how to make out a tender form. So Simmons came and leant over her, and talked in the best Civil Service lingo, and he had had onions for his lunch. Oh, yes, the path of duty is very hard, even at £3 a week.

Jan did very little for the first month and then the work began to pour in. It stood about in high piles on all the tables, on the floor—there were dockets everywhere—and Jan worked for all she was worth and found out the rules of the Service:

- (1) Take no responsibility,
- (2) Shift blame,
- (3) Accept good work in silence, and blame bad.

It took her some time to master the intricacies

of staff. The head of the room she knew, he was Mr. Perks—but there was a head of the branch, a Mr. Fisher, and then a superintending clerk over two branches, and above that an assistant director, Mr. Protheroe. But he wasn't a proper assistant-director, only acting, and a deputy director could turn his decisions down any day.

In the dim distance loomed a director with so many thousands a year private income that he served his country for love and had a secretary to sign his checks and rang for an assistant secretary to ring for a messenger to mend the fire.

And of clerks, temporary and assistant and second-class, and examiners and junior contract officers there was no end.

They were all men living on the edge of enough, but never getting inside.

An unexpected doctor's bill worried them, a holiday had to be schemed for if taken; they had a leaning toward alpaca coats for office wear, and nearly all had a grievance.

It would have been dull enough for Jan if she hadn't been interested in mankind, and a good listener. And the man has yet to be born who can resist the temptation of talking about himself. Bowerman, the typist, told her about his baby, and how his wife had had to be sent away for a time to a nursing home, and how difficult it was to pay the fees and find someone to look after the boy on £4 a week. Simmons, the boy clerk,

turned the telephone upside down so that Jan could reach it, though the others had to stand with their knees bent to speak into it, and put a small radiator on to her desk "to 'eat the place where your 'ands will be," he explained.

That was in exchange for a good half hour when they should have been working, but Simmons spent it in demonstrating a new mouse-trap he had devised with a spring which, according to him, made death positively pleasant for the mouse.

Perks found her interested and sympathetic about his costing schemes and his belief that every clerk who saved the Government more than a certain amount ought to have a percentage of what was saved, and she would listen while he dilated on what a dirty little skunk Protheroe could be. A lad in the corner, "a perfect little lady," borrowed books from her and lost them, and a man in the next department showed her a letter from his girl, who broke off relations Mondays and Thursdays, but made it up again in between times.

"Are you awake, Jan, and many happy returns of the day." Mona stuck her head round the door.

"Thanks—of course I'm awake—with you and Clare stampeding like elephants about the place. What's the time?"

"Nearly eight; I must fly. I'll be home early; it's my free afternoon."

"Cheerio—I'm getting a half day, too. Oh, bring me up my letters—there's a saint!"

There were the usual greetings from Aunt Annie; a tiny compressed note from Sarah to her dear Miss Jan, and a letter from Miss Blakeborough inviting her to the flat for Christmas. There was a card from Willie Griffiths saying he was in town and might he call, and during breakfast a telegram from Dick Goodyer—and that was all.

"Damn!" said Jan; and by the way she slammed about no one could have known that she had reached the age of freedom and independence, and had received kindly congratulations from friends, though some relations had been silent.

She stopped on the way to buy a cake for office tea, and arrived ten minutes late to find both Mr. Protheroe and Mr. Fisher in the room, and Perks turning over the books in a fury.

"Ah!" said Mr. Protheroe, "here is Miss Owen at last."

He lived in Essex, and the only available train landed him at Charing Cross by nine-thirty, so he was a stickler for punctuality, and that suited Perks, whose baby couldn't sleep after six o'clock. It was the one point they had in common.

"1072A, Miss Owen—Circuit Breakers," rapped out Perks. "What did we pay last time and who got the contract? I can find no entry."

"I know I entered it," Jan said.

"It's not there," said Mr. Protheroe. "I've looked myself."

Mr. Fisher gazed in abstracted silence at the fire. Curse women, privatum and seriatim! His branch was always making mistakes—and Protheroe was the very devil.

"May I see?" said Jan, taking the index from Perks' hand.

It was opened at "B"—Breakers; and there was no entry. Jan turned the pages quickly to "C"—Circuit Breakers; there it was: "1072A—Willard & Dabbs—£6.10.0 each for 1,000: delivery to commence in three months and continue at rate of 75 per week—the contract to be completed by——"

"Here, sir," said Perks.

Mr. Protheroe looked at the entry. He was a little man with glasses on the tip of his nose and a nanny-goat beard which he was always pulling with one hand. He suffered from nerves, and his department suffered with him. He was fond of saying, "I hope I am broad-minded enough," to do this or that, and no one cared to contradict him because they did all hope that his petty, shallow little policies would one day grow broader, and until then it was useless to say anything.

"This is very bad, Miss Owen," he announced; "an entirely wrong entry."

"Oh, no," said Jan, "they did get that contract. I remember Mr. Dabbs came up—I saw him."

She remembered quite well, because Mr. Dabbs had made a mistake and called her a "devilish pretty girl" and asked her out with him. Jan remembered quite well what she had said to him and so did Mr. Dabbs.

"I am quite aware of that, Miss Owen"—the little man's tone was pompous—"it is the entry that is wrong—it should be under B—Breakers—not C. Are all your books in this disgraceful muddle, Perks?"

Last week had been a rush and Perks hadn't got home till ten any night, and Mr. Protheroe knew it, but that was the only allusion he made to it.

"If you can't look after your branch, Fisher, it's not much good your having one"; he turned to the unoffending Mr. Fisher, and then passed out, leaving two men with a lower vitality for their day's work.

"Once mix up Mr. Protheroe with a toad and you'd never separate them," was Jan's contribution. "But don't mind him," she cried, turning on the two men, "you know it was my mistake, nothing to do with either of you—though I'm ever so sorry, but how could I know?"

Mr. Fisher laughed and Perks said: "Never mind—you can't learn everything in three months," but both knew that on Mr. Protheroe's recommendation depended their chances of promotion, and that "the disgraceful muddle in the books"

would remain in his memory like an unloved guest.

Perks explained the books and the situation to her during the morning.

"You've got to keep on the right side of old Protheroe," he said; "he's not bad sometimes."

"I think he's appalling," said Jan, "he's not fit to be in charge of men. He saps all their strength and cheerfulness. He's a dreadful little person."

"Wait till you've been here sixteen years," yawned Perks, "and then see what you think of it."

Jan looked at him curiously. "You don't really mean that, do you? You haven't spent sixteen long years of your precious life—here?" The last word was a condemnation, and Perks stood up for his calling.

"It's not so bad sometimes," he said.

"I don't know how you can stand it. I simply couldn't put up with Mr. Protheroe."

"Oh, yes, you could," he corrected her, "if you were in my shoes. I'm thirty-six and I'm married, with two children, and the girl's beginning school next term, and they've both just got over measles, and I want to get 'em away this summer. A man's not free to throw up his work—not if he's married. He's got to consider other people dependent on him, see?"

"Yes," Jan answered, slowly, "but Mr. Protheroe's so—so—insulting."

"Of course he is; but this morning was nothing to what he can be. Good Lord! it's part of the game for an £800-a-year man to curse the man who gets £400."

"I don't know," said Jan, slowly; "it isn't very nice."

"Nice!" he almost shouted at her. "Really, it's damnable! Look around you in any tube or train any evening of the week, in any A.B.C. or Lyons any day, and you'll see scores of men—hundreds of 'em all in the same boat. They're dependent for their living on someone above them, and they've got to dance to his piping or not at all. They're not beastly aristocrats like the miners and railwaymen, they daren't strike. They can't afford it. They mug along somehow—God knows how—taking good and bad, only a sight more bad than good."

Perks wiped his face: he hadn't been so emphatic for years.

"It seems to me it's bad for one's immortal soul to put up with unjustified rudeness." Jan spoke from the youthful security of £300 a year of her own.

"It's worse for the mortal body not to," he assured her. "Pride is a very expensive thing; I can't afford it."

Jan turned to her work, but her mind wandered. Of course pride was expensive. She had learnt that during the last two years when she had wanted

a dozen times to write to John and tell him things and hadn't done so. Why didn't John come home or at least write to her? It was so unthinkable that she should write to him first. He would have liked that speech she made at Girton on the Dis-establishment of the Church of England in England as well as Wales. If she had let him know, he would have written to Sarah about Sarah Jan. As a matter of fact he did, because Sarah told him in her weekly letter about Jan, only Jan never knew that Sarah wrote. But when Jan earned 25/- for writing an advertisement on Bath Salts, she did write a long letter to John, only she tore it up.

He had missed a lot, she reflected, but since there are always two halves to a dozen—so had she. "It's yours for the asking, but by God you'll have to ask," he'd said. Then he could keep his ring.

The telephone bell rang, and Jan answered it, was assured by the exchange that they were sorry she had been troubled, and got back to her seat as it rang again.

This time a muffled voice asked for Miss Owen.

"Speaking," said Jan.

"Oh, hallo, Jan!" went on the voice, "it's Willie Griffiths this end."

"Hallo, Willie—when did you come up? Don't tell me it's business, because I shan't believe you."

"Shall I say I came up for your birthday?"

What about lunch? May I come and fetch you?"

"Rather! One o'clock in the main entrance. Cheorio."

She hung up the receiver and turned to find Perks's eyes fixed upon her.

"It's my birthday," she said. "I forgot to give you the cake before."

"Happy returns! Twenty-one?"

Jan nodded. "It's a great age—woman of the world, responsibilities, and all that kind of thing, don't you know."

"Age," snorted Perks, "why, any conductor would offer you a child's ticket. Gad! I wish I'd got my time over again. You've everything before you. It's all up to you; you ought to be able to make what you like of your life. Let's have some cake? No, I forgot—it's for tea."

"You can have some now if you like," said Jan, "if it won't spoil your lunch. Nothing ever spoils mine."

"Nor mine, and a Dundee cake wouldn't. I've never had enough."

"Well, you shall to-day," said Jan. "It was meant for the room, but since the others are out at lunch they'll never know. One, two, three, and away. Here's the first piece," and she handed him a schoolboy's wedge, and took a small slice for herself.

"Now another," she said, five minutes later,

when all that was left of the first slice was a crumb on Mr. Perks's chin.

"May I really?" beamed Perks, holding out his hand for a second slice.

He attacked this with less energy, and toyed with the third slice. "It can't be done," he said, regretfully. "You've destroyed one of the illusions of my life, Miss Owen. I always thought I could go on eating cake till further notice."

"Good for me, then! I've helped you on your way to bliss, that is when you are stripped free of all illusions."

The real lunch was not such a success as it should have been. Willie was late and absent-minded, and twice he called Jan Clare, which was a silly thing to do.

"What have you come up for this time?" she asked.

"Er—business." Willie gave a laudable imitation of a professional gentleman humouring a lady friend.

"Don't be a silly ass, Willie," Jan advised him, "and don't be pompous. I know you. Do you expect me to believe that your father or Uncle Henry would trust you?"

"Why not?" Willie demanded.

"I don't know," said Jan, untruthfully, because it's difficult to tell your host that he's no business man—no—nor never will be!

"Come along to the flat," she suggested when

they had finished. "By the way, it's Mona's free afternoon. But there's nothing particularly 'free' about it, since she sits and corrects books all the time, and she says they nearly all make the same mistakes."

"Good lor!" ejaculated Willie.

"I can't think how she can think of sticking to it all her life," went on Jan—they were sitting on the front seat of a 'bus—"and there's Clarc; she says she's going to teach."

"Good lor!" Willie's stock of exclamations was small, but he varied his tone to meet the demands of the situation.

"I expect Dick Goodyer will blow in some time to-day."

"Oh, good egg! Nice chap, Dick. I saw him—I met him this morning. He said he might drop in."

"That," remarked Jan with an air of wisdom, "means that he'll come to tea and stay till supper. And Mona will giggle without stopping once, and Clare will say in a bored way, 'Oh, Dick, how absurd you are!' and Dick will think he's being brilliant."

"Good old Dick!"

"Of course," continued Jan, confidentially, "it's an awful secret, but I shouldn't really wonder if Dick married Mona, and if he does, all their children will be as grave as judges. And enough to make them."

Brynavon does not talk of potential babies, nor their likely characteristics, so Willie ignored that part of the conversation.

"I don't think Clare will ever marry," went on Jan. "What's the matter, Willie? Do you feel ill? It's a jolly old 'bus!"

"No, thank you—— Why not—Clare, I mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. She'd want pots of money and a big house, and a husband much cleverer than herself, and society and—— Here we are."

"I'm not coming in," said Willie, when they stood on the pavement in front of the flat.

"Why not?" Jan demanded. "Of course you're coming to tea?"

"I'm not coming in," Willie repeated, dully, "and I'm going home to-night. Good-bye."

He didn't wait to shake hands, but fled away like some rabbit, into the dusk of the afternoon, and a girl with her face pressed to the window-pane in the flat saw him go.

"I thought I saw someone with you." Clare did not wait for the usual birthday amenities.

Jan was feeling aggrieved. "Yes, but that duffer Willie Griffiths—— He came to the door, and then said: 'I shan't come in, I'm going home to-night.'"

"Why?" Clare knew her man and she knew Jan. There must have been some good reason to turn Willie back from the gate.

"Goodness knows," Jan answered. "One minute he's as keen as mustard. If you want to know, we were talking of the kind of man you'd marry—at least I was. I'd got you a beauty. What on earth's the matter now?" for Clare's face was transfigured with temper, and she stamped on the floor.

"You idiot!" she gasped. "Oh, you awful idiot! Why can't you mind your own business?" and Clare slammed out of the room and locked herself in her bedroom.

She came back ten minutes later, unruffled and smiling. "You poor dear!" she said at the sight of Jan's troubled face—"it wasn't your fault. But I should like to suggest you didn't make quite so free with my name."

"I'll wire him," said Jan.

"No, you won't," Clare answered, "you'll do nothing but leave it alone. He'll turn up smiling soon—you bet. Let's get tea, Dick and Mona have gone out."

Willie, meanwhile, had boarded the first train that came along. He told himself he'd been an awful fool to think of Clare—"pots of money and society and a strong, silent hero." He couldn't offer her that. Praise the Lord he hadn't made a fool of himself to her.

And then came the reaction. Jan wasn't everyone, and didn't know everything; she did not know Clare, for example, half as well as he did, and once or twice he'd fancied—

A child's wail disturbed him.

"I want a bun," bellowed a boy of four, with the tears streaming down his cheeks.

"You ax properly, Albert, and maybe as you'll 'ave it." The moralist was a stout, elderly woman in rusty black who held a bag of buns well out of the child's reach.

Albert danced with rage. "I want a bun," he reiterated at the top of his voice.

"Oh, 'old your noise," quoth Albert's mother to her offspring—"give 'im a bun, Ma."

"Ma" was inflexible. "Say 'please,'" she said, fumbling in a promising way in a bag.

"Please," said Albert, and subsided with his teeth in the bun.

Just opposite to Willie, on one of the ventilators of the train, the society which prints texts in public places had put: "Ask and it shall be given unto you." The letters were red on white ground glass, and they caught Willie's attention as he raised his eyes about Albert's head.

Anyhow, he turned up at the flat half an hour later. Clare opened the door, and at the sight of her all the colour left Willie's face. He forgot to say good-evening—he forgot his carefully prepared speech—he could remember nothing except that Clare was before him and that he loved her.

"Will you marry me?" he blurted out.

Clare gave a queer, stifled laugh, and there was a

look in her eyes like mothers have when they smile at their little boys.

"Yes," she answered, "but can't we discuss it somewhere warmer than the doorstep?"

Jan arrived back from Paddington cold and annoyed.

"He hasn't gone by the 4:30, Clare," she shouted from the hall.

"I told you not to trouble, dear," Clare called back, "Willie is here."

"In the dining-room?" Jan made for the door.

"Don't, Jan," Clare urged, "Dick and Mona are there."

"Where's Willie?" Jan demanded.

"In the kitchen with me—it's all all right."

The kitchen door closed, and Jan stood in the hall.

"It's my birthday," she decided, "but the others have had the presents. Oh, how I hate John."

## CHAPTER XVIII

9, The Parade, Brynavon,  
1 Feb. 19—.

DEAR JAN:

Here I am settled down in your old home—a staid married woman. I love it all—every corner of it, every minute of the day, and although we have about as much money for house-keeping as I used to have for a dress-allowance, we are as happy as the day is long. And I mean to spur Willie on and make him as ambitious as I am for him.

Your aunt called yesterday. She was very kind and most interested in everything.

Oh, Mr. Owen has resigned from being president of the Temperance Association, and they have elected Willie. He is so young that I feel it is a great honour.

We are very comfortable and Mr. Owen has found me two respectable girls.

Jan got no further. She laid her head on the table and laughed till she cried.

“Clare will be happy now,” she told herself. “Everyone in Brynavon has respectable girls; Clare’s tumbled to it already. Hooray!”

11, The Parade,  
1 Feb. 19—.

MY DEAR NIECE:

I trust you are keeping well, though the weather here has been very unsettled, and your Uncle Henry has had a bad

attack of rheumatism. His arm was very painful—couldn't move without a stick.

Old Mr. Evans, the Methodist minister, died New Year's Day—cast a gloom over us all.

Young Mrs. Griffiths is settled in very comfortably next door to us. She is a sweet girl and very devoted to Willie, so fortunate for his mother.

I am thinking of coming to London for a few days next month if I can spare time—Some nice respectable hotel, reasonable and with good, plain food.

No more at present—

From your affectionate

AUNT ANNIE.

The Nook, St. John's Wood.

1 Feb. 19—.

DEAR OLD THING:

Here we are again! Being married is the most topping fun. Dickie and I rag all day long.

He knows piles of people, and we are hardly ever at home. You'll think us shockingly Bohemian, but I love it.

Would you care to come along next week to "The Climbers' Club" with us. Do, if you can—it's an awful rag.

Yours,

MONA GOODYER.

Pentre Fawr, Brynavon.

DEAR MASTER JOHN:

Thank you very much for your letter. I hope you are quite well, the same as it leaves me here at present.

Miss Jan does not come home much now, but I saw her in London at Christmas time. She is very thin, Master John, and now she is living alone.

Master John, I hope you will soon come home again now.

Davy is keeping well and the farm is doing fair.

Thank you, indeed, Master John, for the brooch.

Yours respectfully,

SARAH JONES.

**DEAR CLARE:**

My best congratulations to you and Willie. I hope you'll both be very very happy.

I am coming home again soon, as you say to prospect.  
And then—

Both you and Sarah tell me that Jan is pale and thin, and I can't bear the idea of her living alone. Isn't there any one to look after her?

How do you like Brynavon?

My love to you both—

JOHN OWEN.

**MRS. OWEN,**

Pentre Fawr.

**DEAR MADAM:**

Sorry to say that I cannot let you have butter this week as usual. Davy is very poorly, and I cannot leave—

Yours respectfully,

SARAH JONES.

**DEAR MISS BLAKEBOROUGH:**

Camden Town.

I shall love to come to you for half-term. Thank you very much for asking me. Clare and Mona seem very happy in quite different ways.

I love being alone, especially as I'm not often in.

I have sent on the patterns of silk you asked me for.

Much love,                    JAN.

**DEAR JOHN:**

I am delighted to hear you are coming home.

Jan is coming to me for half-term. Will you come, too?

I value your happiness next to hers.

Yours ever,

NESTA BLAKEBOROUGH.

Will you come home to me? I am very lonely without you.

But the last is an extract from a letter which was never sent.

## CHAPTER XIX

JAN flung her hat into one corner of the room, her coat into another, and herself into an armchair.

It was all rot for a facetious press to talk of the "knitting, tea-making girls of Whitehall!" In her office, everyone slaved, with Mr. Protheroe's tongue cutting like a lash.

Perks had said he wasn't free to say what he thought, but, to-day, Jan had said it.

It had cost her a resignation, but she reckoned the satisfaction cheap, though the practical utility was doubtful. The question had arisen out of nothing, as most government questions do, but Jan had stayed late at the office for the best part of last week drafting an agreement on the costing question with Willard & Dabbs.

Perks had a good head for figures but no idea how to present them in intelligible English, and Jan found it difficult to count her change correctly, but wrote a clear, forcible style, and between the two of them they drew up a very decent little piece of work, and Perks took it in to Mr. Protheroe.

"Humph!" grunted Protheroe, tossing it aside, "I'll glance at it later. And look here, Perks,

why the devil can't that Miss Owen check better? There's a typing mistake in two letters this morning. You ought to see it."

Now Perks wasn't the sort of fool to fill other people's breaches, but Jan was rather different.

"Miss Owen's work is good generally," he said; "she's helped me considerably with that proposed agreement."

"I'll see it later," grunted Protheroe.

Mid-day he took it in to the director. "I've rather an idea about Willard & Dabbs," he began. "Will you look at the draft and let me know what you think?"

And two days later he returned it to Perks. "The Governor thinks quite well of my little scheme," he announced.

"What scheme?" asked Perks, tactlessly.

"That costing scheme for Willard & Dabbs, of course," rapped out the Acting-Assistant Director.

Perks was silent from amazement, and even Jan, with her opinion of the Civil Service, was dumbfounded. All would have been well if Mr. Protheroe had gone then, but he rather admired Jan in spite of himself. There was a flavour in her caustic speech, and the slow smile she sometimes conceded to his jokes was decidedly pleasant to see.

Now Jan ran a tea-club in her room, partly because she liked a cup of tea herself, and partly

because the men needed it, and while Mr. Protheroe waited the kettle boiled over.

"The kettle, Miss Owen," piped up Simmons, the boy clerk.

Jan was in the middle of a column of figures which had come out different three times, and Protheroe was standing in the light.

"Take it off, please, Simmons," she said, without looking up.

Simmons obeyed, and Mr. Protheroe with no intent but pleasantry remarked:

"Some people know how to get others to do their work."

Jan smiled. "That's the way to rise in the Service, isn't it?" she asked, sweetly, and Perks coughed behind his hand.

Mr. Protheroe preened himself like an offended bird and turned to Perks. "By the way, Perks, I wish you'd have a look at the draft—page 2. The Governor would like to see it in the morning. You might get Miss Owen to type it again, unless she can find someone else to do it for her."

And then Jan lost her temper.

"If I were what you pretend to think me, I'd be fit to work for you," she blazed at him. "The draft agreement was Mr. Perks' idea—you peck all the brains and sap away the courage of your men. You are beneath the contempt of most and the laughing stock of all Contracts."

She didn't raise her voice, but everyone in the

room heard every syllable, and Mr. Protheroe had the good sense to go.

An awful silence fell upon the room, and the lady-like boy in the corner wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Whew!" whistled Perks at last, with gleaming eyes. "Well, you have a nerve." Then he sat back in his chair and laughed.

Jan was very pale and stern. "It's my contribution to the liberty of the subject," she said. "I hate being a shrew, but somebody had to be. I hope it will do somebody good some time."

She was trembling even now as she thought it over. She had written a resignation before she left and she was well rid of office work, anyway; it would be nice to have a rest before taking up other work, and was the pleasure of tea worth the trouble of getting it?

Then she dozed off into a troubled sleep and awoke an hour later to find the fire getting low and the room in darkness. The clock ticked loudly, and from the flat below rose the sound of tea-things, the hum of conversation, and now and again a laugh.

And, suddenly, Jan dug her nails deep into the palms of her hands and grit her teeth. She was wide awake enough now, tingling with some feeling she couldn't define. And she had the whole evening before her 'and to-morrow and the next day—running on to the weeks and years. Life was

before her like some plastic lump for her to mould, and she was free.

It was a hateful word—a mere mockery. Apparently it meant nothing but loneliness. Mona was always saying she wasn't free to do this or the other because of Dickie, but Mona was riotously happy. Jan stood up and lit the gas. She wasn't lonely, anyhow, because she always was glad when Mona went home after one of her frequent visits, and by the way, did John ever mean to come home? Jan thought of little else but John these days. She knew now that she missed him, she knew that she wanted him! Perks was right every time when he said that pride was expensive, but since John knew all he did, how could she write to him, and why didn't he come home?

Free! Of course she was free, but sometimes things can be paid for too highly.

"I'll read," said Jan out loud to herself, growing frightened at the stillness of the room and the haunting insistence of her thoughts.

She picked up the first book from the table. It happened to be a volume of Christina Rossetti's poems, and opening at random, Jan read from "The Royal Princess":

All my walls are lost in mirrors wherein I trace  
Self to right hand—self to left—self in every place,  
Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face!

The Princess had known she was captive and had chafed under the restraint. Jan had thought

she was free. She had meant to rove at will, and really she had been like a bird on a weather-vane, turning this way and that, but always fixed to self.

Jan flung the book with all her force into a corner, and then was ashamed of herself and went and picked it up, and smoothed the dog-eared leaves in half-deprecating apology to Miss Rossetti.

But wasn't John ever coming home? Jan opened the book again in an effort to concentrate her thoughts and quench this question which she couldn't answer.

Alone by day, alone by night—alone days without end.

Jan got no further, but buried her head in her cushion and cried until she could cry no more.

A knock at the door roused her, and she took the precaution of turning the lights low so that the visitor shouldn't be able to see her red eyelids.

Mona stood on the threshold. "Are you coming with us to 'The Climbers' to-night?" she said. "What a beggar you are, Jan, not to answer my note! Restall is speaking. He ought to be awfully good."

"Who's Restall?" asked Jan, languidly, leading the way to the dining-room.

Mona gave a high laugh. "Restall! My dear Jan, he's *the* modern poet."

"Sorry, I never heard of him."

"Oh, he's too wonderful, my dear! He writes *vers libre*, you know; he simply can't stand restraint or set forms. He must have perfect freedom, he says."

Jan pricked up her ears. "If he knows what it is," she said, "I'd like to come. When? Now?"

"Of course. We'll have dinner at a little place in Soho, and we'll meet Dickie at the club. Buck up, old thing, and get your things on."

Mona had changed since her marriage. The subtle scent of pedantry which hangs round the conversation and manners of teachers had been swept away by the breezy winds of Bohemianism. The inevitable coat and skirt of the high-school mistress had given place to a sloppy djibbah-like garment of russet brown, while a hat after Liberty, and a long way after, was crammed low on her brow. The effect was not very pleasing, but Jan wouldn't have noticed anything, at least she would have tried not to, if Mona had for one second been natural. But her whole attention was focussed on disassociating her present self from the girl she had been before marriage, like those people who, on entering a new faith, curse the old one which nourished them and their fathers for generations.

"I never go to church now," she giggled as they made their way toward Soho.

"Why not?" demanded Jan, bluntly.

"Alone by day, alone by night, alone days

without end." The words kept repeating themselves in her mind: they stared at her from every poster—she seemed to hear them from the lips of every passer-by.

"I simply can't—Dickie doesn't—nobody does, do they?"

"All the people who count do," was Jan's laconic reply. "You can't rule out one whole side of intellectual life and still claim to be an all-round thinker."

"How too amusing you are, Jan," Mona giggled. "Now Restall was awfully interesting last Sunday. He was showing that Christianity isn't really modern. 'It's effete,' he said. There was a huge discussion."

"There would be," said Jan; "you notice—people condemn religion and dislike it, but they can't leave it alone. If I were good enough, I'd take it up—religion, I mean."

"You! And you've spent all your life kicking against the things religion stands for—like restraint and discipline——"

"The point is, if you're good enough, you don't feel them. You rise out of yourself above them, that's what I mean."

"Lord!" ejaculated Mona, but with no pious intent. If Jan started like this, it didn't augur well for the evening's entertainment.

"I hope you'll like the club," she said, doubtfully. "You mustn't let us shock you," she added,

brightly, with the determination to do so if possible.

They dined together at a little restaurant which Mona thought dashing and Jan thought dirty. Jan ordered ginger beer and Mona *vin ordinaire* with about as much alcohol in it as vinegar. But she sipped it delightedly with a self-conscious smirk. "Dick says I'm a terror," she said, proudly, when Jan made no comment on her choice of drinks.

"Why?" If Jan's father heard, he must have laughed at the idea of his daughter being shocked by any one taking wine. But it was hard luck on Mona, who could not be expected to know of John's bibulous tendencies.

"My dear!" she said, pettishly, "you're a positive scream. Wait till you're married."

"What for?" demanded Jan. In all her life John had not once called her a "terror." Did John ever mean to come home?

"Never, never again," Mona vowed to herself, "will I bring Jan Owen out. She's like lead, and she's getting disagreeable."

"She's no more Bohemian than the Shah of Persia," Jan decided, indignantly. "She's as self-conscious as—as—I am."

"It's time we went," said Mona, "but I don't think, after all, you will like the club."

Jan didn't. It consisted of some young men and not such young women. The men's hair was

rather long—the women's short. They called themselves "The Climbers," but their ascents were intellectual and had nothing whatever to do with sport.

A youth who would have been better looking after a Turkish bath was reading a paper when they arrived. The room was fairly well filled and hazy with smoke.

"It's Restall," Mona whispered when they were seated.

"Restall?" Jan's tone was blank, but Mona did not enlighten her a second time.

The gentleman gave a selection from his poems in a bored, tired way. They were not bad, Jan thought, nor particularly good. They were pretty and slight and ineffectual.

"The note of modern poetry," went on the speaker, wearily, "is freedom. Poetry has broken away from the traditions of a stereotyped past. The moderns have a *verve*—a spontaneity—a freshness all their own."

He said the same thing in different words many times over, and quoted freely from his own work by way of illustration.

"I expect you will think I am very daring," he said, "but I must confess my inability to read Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Browning, and the other traditional immortals. If this dismays you, I am sorry. But it is so—and I am quite willing to stand the racket which I expect my revolutionary outlook will have caused."

He sat down amid loud clapping and the secretary rose and invited a discussion; and thereafter everyone who spoke did so with the pleased assurance of being rather the devil of a fellow, while the women were positively roguish.

Jan felt sick. If they really could not read Browning's "Epilogue to Asolando," nor "The Lost Leader," nor a dozen other immortal gems, then they ought to deplore it, and strive to hide their shame. She would as soon have boasted that Shakespeare, Keats, or Shelley bored her, as that she had eleven fingers, or chronic dyspepsia. A lady on her right rose to avow a detestation of Rossetti, Swinburne, Tennyson, and there was loud laughter and applause; another confessed that Milton sent her to sleep—she simply couldn't keep awake; and there followed an epidemic of the confessions of the people who could not stand the works of great and mighty men. It reminded Jan of a revivalist meeting when, carried away by storms of emotions, quiet, well-bred people stood up and vied with one another in confessing sins no one had thought them capable of entertaining. At the time Jan had fancied they painted themselves unnecessarily black and that there was a certain emulation among the sinners for the chief place.

"What do you think of it?" Dick whispered to her.

"Not much," she whispered back so solemnly that he laughed.

"Don't be too hard on us all," he said; "your standard is too high nowadays. We're not all Owens and famous authors."

"If you're trying to be funny, Dick, don't," Jan advised him. "It's not your rôle."

"Did you ever trouble to think what your rôle is, my child, except to weigh us all in the balance and find us wanting?"

"Hush!" hissed a lady, who was trying to listen to the debate.

"These are only free-lances here," Dick nodded to the room, as if to excuse their unconventional views.

Jan sat back in her chair. If this was freedom, then give her chains; none of these people were free; their outlook was more conventional in its unconventionality than Mrs. Grundy's itself. They were posing and playing like children who in the daylight boo at the bogey man in the cupboard under the stairs, but pass by at a respectful distance once the dusk has fallen.

Out of the gloom a pair of dark eyes met hers and held them. Jan felt her heart quicken and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she recognized Ronnie.

In the first pause he came over and sat down beside her.

"We meet again after the lapse of years," he began, holding out his hand, but possibly Jan did not see it: at any rate, she ignored it.

"How is your wife?" she said, coolly.

It was a crude and immature attack and Ronnie smiled pensively and scratched his chin and ogled at her.

"I, too, have suffered," he announced, "but you would forgive if you only knew."

"Too?" cried Jan, rising to the bait—"too? What do you mean?"

"Ah!" Ronnie sighed. "I know now that I treated you abominably—forgive me, Jan."

"On the contrary," Jan answered, suavely; "you treated me handsomely in the end—I mean when you ran away from John."

Ronnie's face was not pleasant to watch. He never had cared for frontal attacks, but Jan was very attractive.

"Jan!" He dropped his voice to a caressing, familiar note, and laid a hand on her knee.

"Your chair is on my skirt, please." Jan's clear voice could be heard all over the room. Several people looked round.

Ronnie sprang up. "I beg your pardon, Miss Owen," he said. "Excuse me"; and he moved to a group of people near by.

Jan watched him with the same look on her face as, when a child, she had cleared worms out of the way. Everything about him was more accentuated than when she had last seen him. His eyes were more piercing, his skin sallower, his hair more greasy, and his nails, if possible, dirtier.

And if John hadn't come to the rescue—(it had been "interfered" last time)—Oh, Lord! it was too horrid to think about.

A man talking to Ronnie turned and looked at her with raised brows of surprise and Jan felt herself grow hot and cold.

"A nice little girl," she heard Ronnie's thin voice rising, "I met her in Switzerland, and——"

"Hallo, Waring!" a man's voice boomed out, and John stepped from a corner where he had been sitting and smote Ronnie on the back with a friendliness that made his teeth chatter.

For an instant Ronnie looked at him with no recognition in his eyes. "Owen!" he ejaculated at last, in a voice which was rather like a gasp.

"Rather!" said John; "you tell your story of Switzerland first and then I'll tell mine."

"Fire away, Ronnie!" said the man who had looked at Jan.

"Mine will make you sit up," said John, pretty certain of his man. "You were a gay dog in those days, Ronnie."

"Don't be a damn fool, Owen," he said, savagely, "leave it at that, man." Ronnie knew the circle in which he moved, and he realized that ridicule, in John's effective hands, would be a powerful instrument. John could tell the story in such a way as to make Ronnie look nothing but a fool, and an almighty silly one at that! He wouldn't mind being thought sinful, but silly, no!

"Come on, Ronnie, old man," the others urged him.

"It's a damn good story," said John, as if regretting it should be lost to the world, and it wasn't until Ronnie had moved on for the rest of the evening to a cheerier club where the pace was really—well, just a bit—that John moved over to Jan.

And then Dick, the diplomatist, who had engineered everything so wonderfully, retired to the far end of the room, and rested on his oars, so to speak.

Jan hadn't heard what had happened, and she didn't care. John was home—John was back again—John—her John.

"Hallo, Jan!" said John, sitting beside her.

"Hallo, John," she answered. "You are—you are a breathless person, aren't you?"

John laughed, but there was a worried line on his face.

"Jan," he said, suddenly, "have you been ill? You're rather like a shadow."

"No—I'm very fit, thanks."

"And happy?"

"Yes!" said Jan. "When are you going back?"

It was a futile thing to say, but for once Jan was at a loss with John, and in trying to feel her way she blundered.

John stiffened. "Almost immediately," he said, "and this time for good."

"I'm going home," said Jan. In another moment she'd disgrace herself.

"Don't trouble, Jan. I'm off."

And the next moment John left the club-room; and that was all—after more than two years.

Jan sat still, and could not have been more impassive if she had been carved out of stone.

No one took any notice of her, until half an hour later Dick Goodyer came up with a frown on his good-tempered face.

"Restall has taken Mona home," he said, shortly, "will you come now?"

"I couldn't tell him, if he didn't see it," Jan was arguing to herself. "I couldn't, since he didn't want me."

Jan and Dick walked in silence most of the way.

"What did you do to John?" he demanded, suddenly.

"I don't know what you mean." Jan was really startled or she acted very well.

"What did you do to him?" he repeated. "You must have said something to hurt him like that."

"I didn't," said Jan, "and you've no right to talk to me."

"Right!" went on Dick, "and what right have you to spoil a man's life? You drove him to Canada in the first place—you send him away the first time he speaks to you. And you're not fit to black his boots."

. "It's a lie!" cried Jan—"a great, big, damned

lie. John ran away to Canada from school. That had nothing to do with me."

Dick stopped in the middle of the pavement, and in three sentences gave the story of John's expulsion.

"And why wasn't I told before?" Jan asked.

"How should I know?" retorted Dick. "You knew John; that ought to have been enough."

"I did know him once," Jan admitted, "but I don't any longer. I—I have wanted him to come home, and to-night—everything went wrong—in a minute."

"Then it was your fault," interrupted Dick, too angry to be merciful or even mindful of proprieties; "if you don't want John, well and good, but don't be so damned cruel about it."

Jan's face was pearly white, and distorted with an anger as fierce as his own.

"You're a very fine friend of John's," she cried, "so I'll tell you. John doesn't care a snap of the fingers for me any more. He showed it clearly enough to-night, and I—I do—care."

Dick looked at her without speaking for some seconds. "Jan," he said, "I'd like to shake you for being such a blind-eyes."

"And I'd like to kill you and John," cried Jan.

"When John went from the 'Climbers'"—went on Dick quickly—"I dashed after him to his hotel, and he didn't hear me come into his room, because he—John, just you think of it—had his head down

on the table and was crying like a kid for Jan—and Jan—and Jan."

Jan put up her hand as if to shut out an ugly sight. "Don't, Dick," she said, "oh, don't. Take me to him."

The taxi fairly flew along the empty streets, but the porter at the hotel told Dick that Mr. Owen had gone out, so there was nothing to do but drive home to the flat.

It was the longest drive of Jan's life.

Dick pressed her cold fingers. "It will come right now," he comforted her.

"I daren't wait," she answered. "If I write a note, will you take it to him? He must know to-night."

Dick kept the taxi waiting while Jan ran upstairs and wrote with a hand that wouldn't keep still.

Come to me, please, John. I want you very much.

JAN.

"Here you are, Dick," she said, as a footstep sounded on the stairs. But it was John who came into the room.

"Jan!" he said. "Have me on any terms you like, only have me."

Jan held out the letter. "Dick was bringing this to you," she announced.

John read it, and let it drop from his hand as he took a step forward. "Jan!" he said, speaking

like a child repeating a lesson, "you shall still be free—I'll give you all the freedom I can."

"I'd rather have love," Jan answered. Then a smile dawned slowly over her pale face. "I suppose," she asked, with her head on one side, "they are both the same?"

"You've always had that, Jan," he reminded her.

"Now I can return it," said Jan, "that's the difference."

Dick gave them half an hour and then came and fetched John away.

And Jan squeezed John's hand, and said "Good-night, John," but she put her arms right round Dick's neck and kissed him on the forehead twice.

Every diplomatist has his day.

## EPILOGUE

**P**UT the best sheets on the spare-room bed, Emily—no, the best sheet for the top, and a cotton one underneath. Linen sheets get so crumpled, don't they? So don't forget, a best top-sheet; and, Emily—and you'll find the two pillow-shams in the bottom drawer."

"Yes, mum."

"You'll find them in the bottom drawer of the chest. Well, there—perhaps I'd better come myself. Oh, yes, and make up the bed in the little room for Mrs. Jones."

"Yes, mum."

Annie bustled away to Emily's relief, and proceeded to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Alice. Quite nice to see a fine day once more. Now what shall we have for dinner to-night? I want something really nice for Mr. and Mrs. John."

"Yes, mum."

Annie stood in thought for some moments, and the shaft of light through the kitchen window falling on her showed the plentiful gray streaks in her brown hair, and the fine network of lines on her smooth skin.

"I think I'll just pop downtown to Mr. Thomas myself, Alice, and get him to spare me a leg of lamb; that's always nice, isn't it?"

"Yes, mum!"

"And now what about pudding? What can you suggest?"

"Rice, mum?"

"Yes, that will be very nice."

Annie stopped her husband in the hall. "Can you wait a minute, Henry, and I'll come along with you!"

"Certainly, my dear; I'll take a walk round the garden."

"I'm going to see Mr. Thomas myself this morning. I can't have our young people hungry."

"Are they coming to-day?"

"Now, Henry, you surely haven't forgotten that John and Jan come to-day, and the baby."

"Are they coming to us?"

"Of course, dear, until the 'Plas' is ready, but I can't make up my mind where to put Sarah. She can't have her meals with us. It's not quite—well, there."

"Who's Sarah?"

At times Henry was exasperating, but Annie was patient.

"You know, dear, since Davy Jones died (though I always say he did away with himself) . . . yes, I know he died in his bed from pneumonia—fell in the river—drunk, most probably—— Well, where

was I? . . . well, Sarah left 'Pentre' and went to Jan—when, when— Well, she's the baby'snurse."

"Humph! I'm sorry I can't meet the train. I'll try and be home by the time they come."

"Yes, do, dear! I shall go to the station, of course. A mother can't stay away."

Jan was a mother now, too, Henry reflected, as he waited impatiently that evening for the sound of the car. Yes, and John was bringing home his son, and they would live at the "Plas," and there would be a John Owen again.

He hoped John would make more of his son than he had made of John. It is a bitter feeling to be a stranger to one's own child. He had failed to understand John right enough, but no one could say he hadn't tried.

There was the hoot of a motor horn and Henry walked slowly to the door as the car drew up.

John sprang out and helped out Jan who was carrying the baby. Then followed Mrs. Owen and Sarah.

"Hallo, Father!" cried John, kissing Henry.

Depression slipped from Henry's shoulders. After all, a father can't be quite alienated from a grown-up son who kisses him.

"Hallo, Uncle Henry," said Jan.

"Don't stand about, Jan," advised Aunt Annie. "Take the boy indoors."

"How do you do, Sarah?" said Henry. "Had a comfortable journey, I hope?"

Henry paid the taxi man and then followed into the dining-room, where Jan sat on the sofa, pulling off the wee woollen coat of her son.

"Look up at your Uncle Hcnry, sonny?" she exhorted the baby.

Henry came over and had the shock of his life when he gazed down at the face of Jan's baby and saw a replica of himself.

John gave a bellow of appreciative laughter. "It is funny, isn't it?" he said. "But I've done the best I could for you in the way of a grandson, eh, Father?"

Henry bent forward and smoothed the baby's soft little head with one finger.

"Hallo, John boy!" he said, gently.

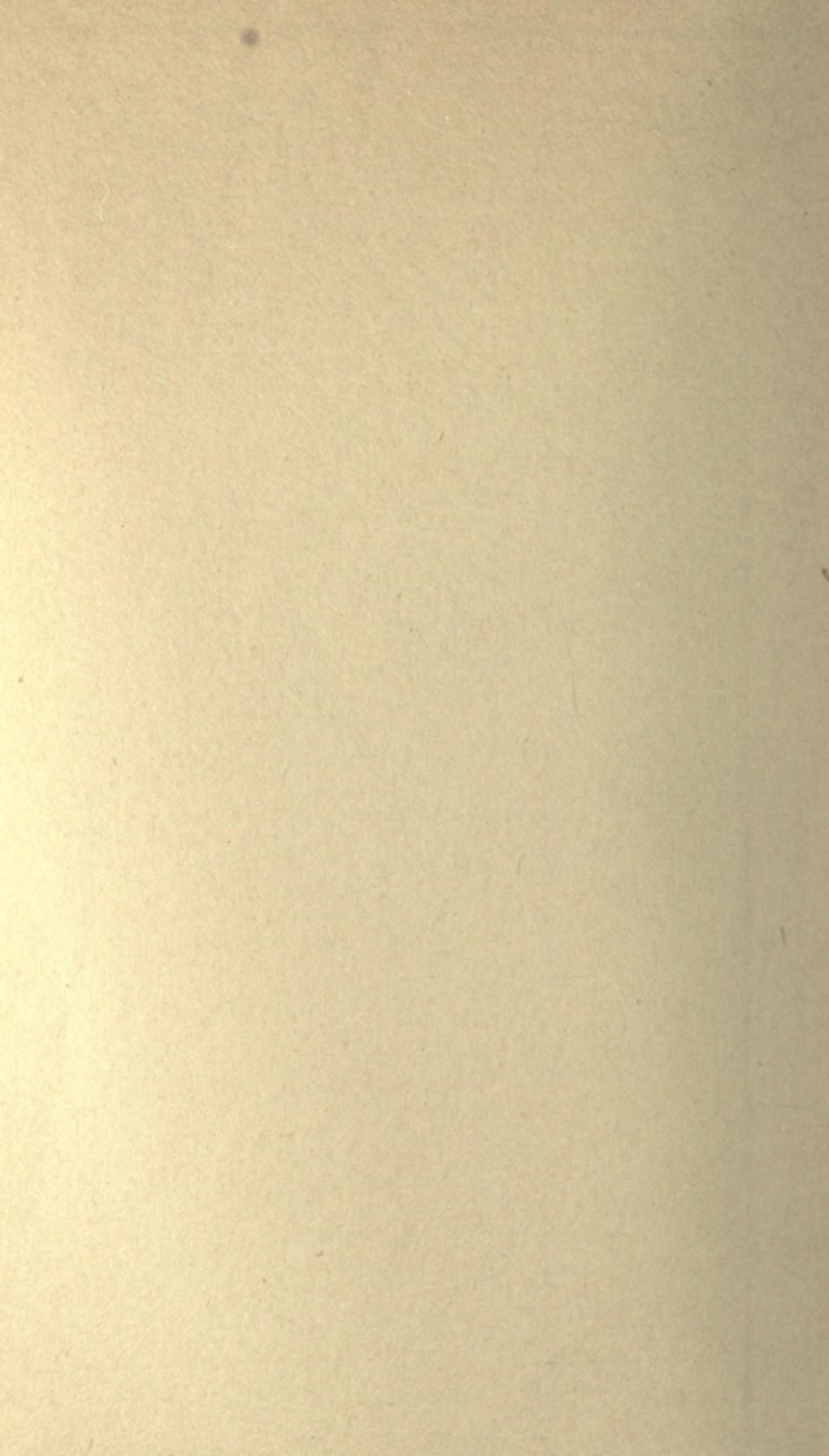
"Excuse me," said Jan, holding up her son, "but this is Henry Owen."

THE END

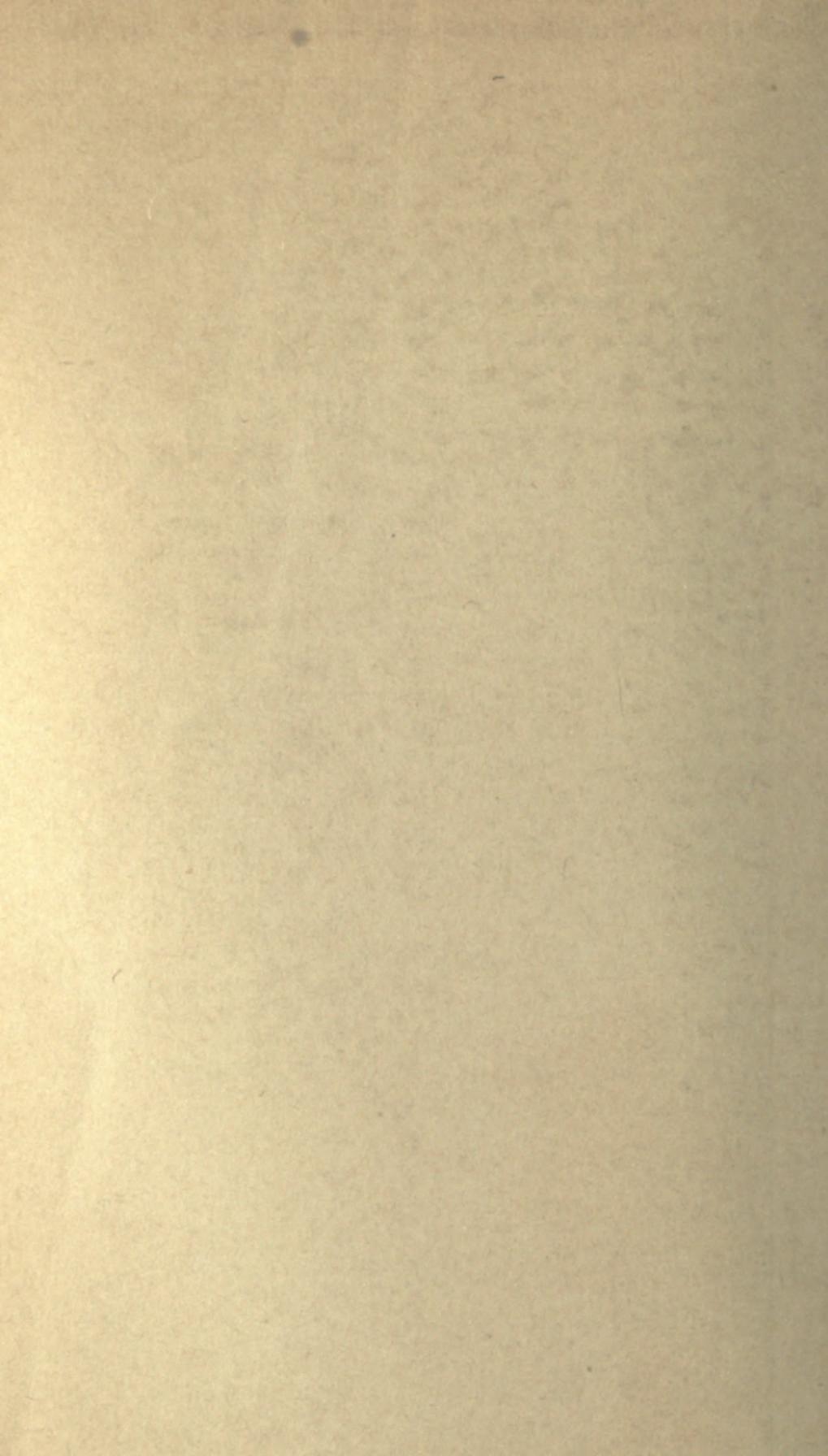


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